

EXHIBIT 33



Praise for Tracy Wolff's *Crush*

An instant *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestseller

An Amazon Best YA Book of the Month

***Glitter* magazine's YA Feminist Must-Reads of 2020**

"Dangerous and intriguing, empowering and swoon-worthy, *Crush* is everything fans of the series didn't know they'd want in a sequel and sets up a third installment you won't want to miss."

—Hypable

"From the hilarious one-liners to the death-defying odds, this book had me turning every page like my life depended on it."

—Vocal.Media

"A fantastic and engrossing follow-up to *Crave*."

—Frolic Media

"Double the romance, stakes, and the danger has ramped up to some pretty critical levels..."

And just WAIT until you read that ending."

—The Nerd Daily

"*Crush* is pure serotonin. I couldn't stop smiling the entire time I was reading it."

—CaitsBooks

"It was mind-boggling, twisty, heart-wrenching goodness all wrapped up into one book."

—Reading Throughout the World

"Tracy Wolff is a gem that I am so grateful for. She has put vampire/paranormal reads back on the map and truly does these stories justice!"

—Living My Best Book Life

Praise for Tracy Wolff's *Crave*

An Amazon Best YA Book of 2020

***Glitter* magazine's #1 Pick for Best YA of 2020**

★ "The generation that missed *Twilight* will be bitten by this one.
Recommended first purchase."

—*SLJ*, starred review

"*Crave* is about to become fandom's new favorite
vampire romance obsession."

—Hypable

"Throw in some deadly intrigue to mingle with the dark secret
Jaxon bears, and you've got a recipe for
YA vampire success in *Crave*."

—*Bustle*

"Wolff has a masterpiece on her hands. It's as simple as that."

—Vocal.Media

"My favorite February read...it's full of suspense and interesting
characters that keep you turning until the last page!"

—Aurora Dominguez, *Frolic's* YA expert

"[C]raving something fun to read, slightly dark
and romantic...couldn't put it down!"

—Natalie Morales, NBC

"Brings gripping tension teeming with a blend of action and
teenage angst. *Crave* is beautifully descriptive with amazing
pacing and wonderfully sinister settings."

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Christine Feehan

crush



crush

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TRACY WOLFF

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*To Elizabeth Pelletier and Emily Sylvan Kim
The two most kick-ass women in the business
There's no one I want to take this journey with more than you*

Woke Up Like This



Being the lone human in a school for paranormals is precarious at the best of times.

At the worst of times, it's a little like being the last chew toy in a room full of rabid dogs.

And at average times...well, at average times, it's honestly pretty cool.

Too bad today is most definitely *not* an average day.

I don't know why, but everything feels a little off as I walk down the hall toward my Brit Lit class, the strap of my backpack clutched in my hand like a lifeline.

Maybe it's the fact that I'm freezing, my whole body trembling with a cold that has seeped all the way to my bones.

Maybe it's the fact that the hand clutching my backpack is bruised and sore, like I got into a fight with a wall—and most definitely lost.

Or maybe it's the fact that everyone, and I mean *everyone*, is staring at me—and it's *not* in that “best of times” kind of way.

Then again, when is it ever?

You'd think I'd have gotten used to the staring by now, since it kind of comes with the territory when you're a vampire prince's girlfriend. But nope. And *definitely* not okay when every vampire, witch, dragon, and werewolf in the place is stopping to stare at you

with their eyes wide and their mouths gaping even wider—like today.

Which, to be honest, really isn't a very good look for any of them. I mean, come on. Aren't I supposed to be the one weirded out in this equation? They've known all along that humans exist. It's only been about a week since I found out the monster in my closet is real. As are the ones in my dorm room, my classes...and sometimes in my arms. So shouldn't I be the one walking around with my mouth wide open as *I* stare at *them*?

"Grace?" I recognize the voice and turn with a smile, only to find Mekhi gawking at me, his normally warm brown complexion more waxy than I've ever seen it.

"Hey, there you are." I shoot him a grin. "I thought I was going to have to read *Hamlet* all by myself today."

"*Hamlet*?" His voice is hoarse, and the hands that fumble the phone out of his front pocket are anything but steady.

"Yeah, *Hamlet*. The play we've been reading for Brit Lit since I got here?" I shuffle my feet a little, suddenly uncomfortable as he continues to stare at me like he's seen a ghost...or worse. This definitely isn't typical Mekhi behavior. "We're performing a scene today, remember?"

"We're not rea—" He breaks off mid-word, thumbs flying over his phone as he sends what his face says is the most important text of his life.

"Are you okay?" I ask, stepping closer. "You don't look so good."

"I don't look so good?" He barks out a laugh, shoves a trembling hand through his long, dark locks. "Grace, you're—"

"Miss Foster?"

Mekhi breaks off as a voice I don't recognize all but booms through the hallway.

"Are you all right?"

I shoot Mekhi a "what the fuck?" look as we both turn to find Mr. Badar, the Lunar Astronomy teacher, striding down the hall.

"I'm fine," I answer, taking a startled step back. "I'm just trying

to get to class before the bell rings.” I blink up at him when he stops directly in front of us. He’s looking a lot more freaked out than an early-morning hallway exchange warrants. Especially since all I’m doing is talking to a friend.

“We need to find your uncle,” he tells me as he places a hand under my elbow in an effort to turn me around and guide me back in the direction I just came from.

There’s something in his voice, less than a warning but more than a request, that gets me walking through the long, lancet-arched hallway without complaint. Well, that and because the normally unfazed Mekhi scrambles to get out of our way.

But with each step I take, the feeling that something isn’t right intensifies. Especially when people literally stop in their tracks to watch us go by, a reaction that only seems to make Mr. Badar more nervous.

“Can you please tell me what’s going on?” I ask as the crowd parts right in front of us. It’s not the first time I’ve seen the phenomenon—once again, I *do* date Jaxon Vega—but it is the first time I’ve seen it happen when my boyfriend is nowhere around. It’s beyond weird.

Mr. Badar looks at me like I’ve grown a second head, then asks, “You don’t know?” The fact that he sounds a little frantic, his deep voice taking on an incredulous edge, ratchets up my anxiety. Especially since it reminds me of the look on Mekhi’s face when he reached for his phone a couple of minutes ago.

It’s the same look I see on Cam’s face as we sweep by him standing in the doorway of one of the Chem classrooms. And Gwen’s. And Flint’s.

“Grace!” Flint calls to me, bounding out of the classroom so he can walk alongside Mr. Badar and me. “Oh my God, Grace! You’re back!”

“Not now, Mr. Montgomery,” the teacher snaps, his teeth clicking together sharply with each word.

So definitely a werewolf, then...at least judging by the size of that canine I see peeking from beneath his lip. Then again, I guess I should

have figured it out by the subject he teaches—who's more interested in the astronomy of the moon than the creatures who occasionally like to howl at it?

For the first time, I wonder if something happened this morning that I don't know about. Did Jaxon and Cole, the alpha werewolf, get into it again? Or Jaxon and another wolf this time—maybe Quinn or Marc? It doesn't seem likely, since everyone has been giving us a wide berth lately, but why else would a werewolf teacher I've never met before be so panicked and single-minded in his determination to get me to my uncle?

"Wait, Grace—" Flint reaches out for me, but Mr. Badar blocks his hand from connecting.

"I said not now, Flint! Go to class!" The words, little more than a snarl, come from low in his throat.

Flint looks like he wants to argue, his own teeth suddenly gleaming sharply in the soft chandelier lighting of the hallway. He must decide it's not worth it—despite his clenched fists—because in the end, he doesn't say anything. He just kind of stops in his tracks and watches us walk by instead...just like everyone else in the corridor.

Several people look like they want to approach—Macy's friend Gwen, for example—but a low, warning growl from the teacher, who's pretty much marching me down the hallway now, and the whole group of them decides to keep their distance.

"Hold on, Grace. We're almost there."

"Almost where?" I want to demand an answer, but my voice comes out sounding raspy.

"Your uncle's office, of course. He's been waiting on you for a long time."

That makes no sense. I just saw Uncle Finn yesterday.

Unease slides across the back of my neck and down my spine, sharp as a razor, causing the hairs on my arms to tingle.

None of this feels okay.

None of this feels *right*.

As we turn another corner, this time into the tapestry-lined hallway that runs in front of Uncle Finn's office, it's my turn to reach into my pocket for my phone. I want to talk to Jaxon. *He'll* tell me what's going on.

I mean, this can't all be about Cole, right? Or about Lia. Or about—I yelp as my thoughts crash into what feels like a giant wall. One that has huge metal barbs sticking out of it that poke directly into my head.

Even though the wall isn't tangible, mentally running into it hurts an astonishing amount. For a moment, I just freeze, a little shell-shocked. Once I get over the surprise—and the pain—of it, I try even harder to move past the obstruction, straining my mind in an effort to get my thoughts together. To force them to go down this mental path that is suddenly completely closed off to me.

That's when I realize—I can't remember waking up this morning. I can't remember breakfast. Or getting dressed. Or talking to Macy. I can't remember anything that's happened today at all.

“What the hell is going on?”

I don't realize I've said the words out loud until the teacher answers, rather grimly, “I'm pretty sure Foster was hoping you could fill him in on that.”

It's not the answer I'm looking for, and I reach into my pocket for my phone again, determined not to get distracted this time. I want Jaxon.

Except my phone isn't in the pocket where I always keep it, and it isn't in any of my other pockets, either. How is that possible? I never forget my phone.

Uneasiness moves into fear and fear into an insidious panic that has question after question bombarding me. I try to stay calm, try not to show the two dozen or so people watching me at this very instant just how rattled I really am. It's hard to keep cool, though, when I don't have a clue what's going on.

Mr. Badar nudges my elbow to get moving again, and I follow

him on autopilot.

We make one more turn and end up at the door leading into the front office of Katmere's headmaster, also known as my uncle Finn. I expect Mr. Badar to knock, but he just throws the door open and propels us into the office's antechamber, where Uncle Finn's assistant is at her desk, typing away on her laptop.

"I'll be right with you," Mrs. Haversham says. "I just need one—"

She glances up at us—over the top of her computer screen and her purple half-moon glasses—and breaks off mid-sentence the second her gaze meets mine. All of a sudden, she's jumping up from her desk, her chair clattering back against the wall behind her as she shouts for my uncle.

"Finn, come quick!" She circles out from behind her desk and throws her arms around me. "Grace, it's so good to see you! I'm so glad you're here!"

I have no idea what she means, just like I have no idea why she's hugging me. I mean, Mrs. Haversham is a nice-enough lady, but I had no idea our relationship had progressed from formal greetings to spontaneous and apparently ecstatic embraces.

Still, I return the hug. I even pat her on her back—a little gingerly, but I figure it's the thought that counts. On the plus side, her soft white curls smell like honey.

"It's good to see you, too," I respond as I start to ease back a little, hoping a five-second hug is all that's necessary in this already bizarre situation.

But Mrs. Haversham is hanging on for the long haul, her arms wrapped around me so tightly that it's growing a little hard to breathe. Not to mention awkward.

"Finn!" she shouts again, paying no attention to the fact that, thanks to the hug, her red-lipsticked mouth is right next to my ear. "Finn! It's—"

The door to Uncle Finn's office flies open. "Gladys, we *have* an intercom—" He, too, breaks off mid-sentence, his eyes going wide

as they find my face.

“Hey, Uncle Finn.” I smile at him as Mrs. Haversham finally releases me from her honeysuckle-scented death grip. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

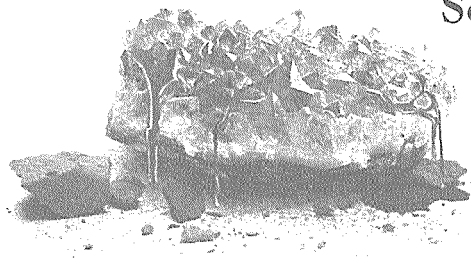
My uncle doesn’t answer. Instead, he just keeps staring at me, mouth working but absolutely no sound coming out.

And my stomach suddenly feels like it’s full of broken glass.

I may not know what I had for breakfast, but I know one thing for sure... Something is very, very wrong.

2

So...What Did I Miss?



I'm about to work up the courage to ask Uncle Finn what's going on—he has a history of not lying to me (at least not when directly confronted)—but before I can force the words out of my absurdly dry throat, he yelps, “Grace!”

And then he's bounding across the office, straight at me.

“Grace, oh my God! Grace! You're back.”

Back? Why do people keep saying that to me? Where exactly did I go? And why wouldn't they expect me to come back?

Again I search my memory, and *again* I slam right into that giant wall. It doesn't hurt as much this time as it did the first—maybe because the shock has worn off—but it's still uncomfortable.

Like Mrs. Haversham, Uncle Finn grabs on to me the second he reaches me, his arms going around my back in a huge bear hug, even as his familiar woodsy scent winds its way around me. It's more comforting than I expect it to be, and I find myself sagging against him a little as I try to figure out what on earth is happening. And why I can't remember anything that might cause this kind of reaction in my uncle...or anyone else I've run into, for that matter.

I was just walking down the hall to class, the same as every other student in the place.

Eventually Uncle Finn pulls back, but only far enough to look at

my face. “Grace. I can’t believe you’ve really come back to us. We’ve missed you so much.”

“Missed me?” I repeat, determined to get answers as I take a couple of steps back. “What does that mean? And why is everyone acting like they’ve seen a ghost?”

For a second, just a second, I see a flash of my own panic in the look Uncle Finn shoots the teacher who brought me here. But then his face smooths out and his eyes go blank (which totally isn’t scary at all), and he wraps an arm around my shoulders and says, “Let’s go into my office and talk about this, shall we, Grace?”

He glances back at Mr. Badar. “Thanks, Raj. I appreciate your bringing Grace to me.”

Mr. Badar nods in silent acknowledgment, his gaze narrowing on me briefly before he heads back into the hallway.

Uncle Finn urges me gently toward his office door—what is it with everyone moving me around today, anyway?—all the while talking to Mrs. Haversham. “Can you message Jaxon Vega and ask him to meet me here as soon as possible? And look up what time my daughter’s”—he glances at me, then back at his assistant—“tests are over as well, please.”

Mrs. Haversham starts to nod, but the door Mr. Badar walked out of swings open so hard and fast that the doorknob actually slams into the stone wall behind it.

My nerve endings go on red alert, and every hair I have suddenly stands straight up. Because, even without turning around, every cell in my body knows exactly who just walked into my uncle’s office.

Jaxon.

One quick glance at his face over my shoulder tells me everything I need to know. Including that he’s about to raise all kinds of hell. And we’re definitely not talking about the good kind here.

“Grace.” His voice is hushed, but the ground beneath my feet rumbles as our gazes collide.

“It’s okay, Jaxon. I’m okay,” I reassure him, but my reassurances

don't seem to matter. Not when he's across the room in little more than a second, pulling me from Uncle Finn's unresisting grip and into his own muscular arms.

It's the last thing I expect—PDA in front of my uncle—but the minute our bodies meet, I can't bring myself to care. Not when all the tension inside me melts at the first brush of his skin against my own. And not when it finally feels like I can breathe for the first time since Mekhi called my name in the hallway. And maybe even a lot longer than that.

This is what I've been missing, I realize as I snuggle deeper into his embrace. This is what I didn't even know I was looking for until the moment his arms went around me.

Jaxon must feel the same way, because he crushes me closer still, even as he blows out a long, slow breath. He's shaking, shuddering, and though the ground has stopped actively rolling, I can still feel it trembling just a little.

I squeeze Jaxon more tightly. "I'm all right," I assure him again, though I don't understand why he's so upset. Or why Uncle Finn is so shocked to see me. But confusion is giving way to my barely contained panic in a giant way.

"I don't understand," I mumble as I lean back to look into Jaxon's eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Everything is going to be okay." The words are crisp, and his gaze—dark, intense, devastating—never wavers from mine.

It's a lot, especially combined with everything else that's happened this morning, and suddenly it's too much. I look away from him, just until I can catch my breath, but that doesn't feel right, either, so in the end, I bury my face against the hardness of his chest again and just breathe him in.

His heart is beating hard and fast—too fast, really—under my cheek, but he still feels like home. Still *smells* like home, like oranges and fresh water and warm, spicy cinnamon. Familiar. Sexy.

Mine.

I sigh again, burrow closer. I've missed this, and I don't even know why. We've been practically inseparable since I got out of the infirmary two days ago.

Since he told me he loves me.

"Grace." He breathes my name like it's a prayer, unconsciously echoing my own thoughts. "My Grace."

"Yours," I agree in a whisper I really hope Uncle Finn can't hear, even as I tighten my arms around Jaxon's waist.

And just like that, something comes to life inside me—bold and powerful and all-consuming. It slams through me like an explosion, shaking me to the depths of my soul.

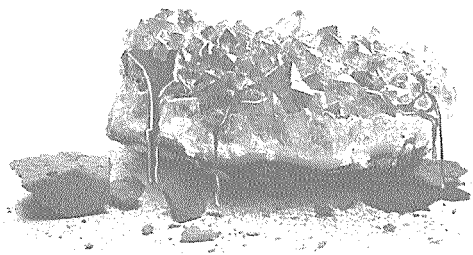
Stop!

Don't!

Not with him.

3

Sleeping Beauty's Got Nothing on Me



Without thinking, I push Jaxon away and stumble back a few steps.

He makes a noise low in his throat, but he doesn't try to stop me. Instead, he just looks at me with his gaze as shocked and shaky as I feel inside.

"What was that?" I whisper.

"What was what?" he answers, watching me carefully. That's when I realize he didn't hear it, didn't *feel* it.

"I don't know. I'm sorry." The words come instinctively. "I didn't mean..."

He shakes his head, even as he, too, takes a definite step back. "Don't worry about it, Grace. It's okay. You've been through a lot."

He means what happened with Lia, I tell myself. But he went through a lot with that, too. And it shows, I realize as I look him over. He's skinnier than I've ever seen him, so that his ridiculous cheekbones and cut-glass jaw look even more defined than usual. His dark hair is a little longer, a little shaggier than I'm used to, so his scar is barely visible, and the purple circles under his eyes are so dark, they look like bruises.

He's still beautiful, but now that beauty is an open wound. One that makes me ache.

The longer I look at him, the deeper the panic takes hold of me. Because these aren't overnight changes. People's hair doesn't grow in a day or two, and they don't usually lose weight that fast, either. Something happened, something big, and for some reason, I can't remember what it is.

"What's going on, Jaxon?" When he doesn't answer fast enough, I turn to my uncle, a sudden anger burning just under my skin. I'm sick and tired of always being kept in the dark.

"Tell me, Uncle Finn. I know something's wrong. I can feel it. Plus my memory's all wonky and—"

"Your memory is wonky?" Uncle Finn repeats, coming close to me for the first time since Jaxon walked into the room. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means I can't remember what I had for breakfast this morning. Or what Macy and I talked about before bed last night."

Again, Jaxon and Uncle Finn exchange a long look.

"Don't do that," I tell them. "Don't cut me out."

"We're not cutting you out," Uncle Finn assures me as he holds up a placating hand. "We're just trying to figure things out, too. Why don't you guys come into my office, and we'll talk for a few minutes?" He turns to Mrs. Haversham. "Can you please call Marise for me? Tell her Grace is here and ask her to come by as soon as possible."

She nods. "Of course. I'll let her know it's urgent."

"Why do we need Marise?" My stomach tightens at the thought of once again being checked over by Katmere's nurse practitioner—who also happens to be a vampire. The last two times she's done that, I've had to lay on my butt in bed for way longer than I wanted to. "I don't feel sick."

Except I make the mistake of glancing down at my hands for the second time today, and it finally registers just how bruised and bloody they are.

"You look a little worse for wear," my uncle says in a deliberately soothing voice as we enter his office and he closes the door behind us.

"I just want to get you checked out, make sure everything's all right."

I have a million questions, and I'm determined to get answers to them all. But once I'm seated at one of the chairs in front of Uncle Finn's heavy cherrywood desk, and he's perched on the corner of that same desk, he starts asking questions of his own.

"I know this probably sounds strange, but can you tell me what month it is, Grace?"

"The *month*?" My stomach sinks like a stone. I barely get the next word out as my throat closes up. "November."

When Jaxon's and Uncle Finn's gazes collide, I know there's something really wrong with my answer.

Anxiety skitters down my spine and I try to take a deep breath, but it feels like there's a weight pressing on my chest, making that impossible. The pounding in my temples makes the feeling worse, but I refuse to give in to the beginnings of what I recognize could easily turn into a full-blown panic attack.

Instead, I wrap my hands around the edges of my seat to ground myself. Then I take a minute to list several things in the room in my head, just like Heather's mom taught me after my parents died.

Desk. Clock. Plant. Wand. Laptop. Book. Pen. Folders. Another book. Ruler.

By the time I get to the end of the list, my heart rate is almost back to normal and so is my breathing. As well as the absolute certainty something very wrong has happened.

"What month *is* it?" I ask quietly, turning to Jaxon. He's given it to me as straight as he could from the very first day I got to Katmere Academy, and that's what I need right now. "I can handle whatever's going on. I just need to know the truth." I reach for his hand, hold it in both of mine. "Please, Jaxon, just tell me what I'm missing."

Jaxon nods reluctantly. Then whispers, "You've been gone for almost four months."

"Four months?" Shock ricochets through me all over again. "*Four months*? That's impossible!"

"I know it feels that way," Uncle Finn tries to soothe. "But it's March, Grace."

"March," I repeat, because apparently repetition is pretty much all I'm capable of right now. "March what?"

"March fifth." Jaxon's voice is grim.

"March fifth." Forget panic, full-blown terror whips through me now, flaying my insides. Making me feel raw and exposed and empty in a way I can't describe. Four months of my life—of my senior year—have disappeared, and I can't remember any of them. "I don't understand. How could I—"

"It's okay, Grace." Jaxon's gaze is steady on mine, his grip on my hands as firm and supportive as I could ever ask for. "We'll figure this out."

"How can it be okay? I lost four months, Jaxon!" My voice cracks on his name, and I take a shuddering breath and try again. "What happened?"

My uncle reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. "Take another deep breath, Grace. Good." He smiles encouragingly. "Okay, now take one more and let it out slowly."

I do as he says, noticing that his lips move the whole time I'm exhaling. *A calming spell?* I wonder as, once more, I inhale and exhale to the count of ten.

If so, doesn't feel like it's working all that well.

"Now, when you're ready, tell me the last thing you remember." His warm eyes hold mine.

The last thing I remember.

The last thing I remember.

It should be an easy question, but it's not. Partly because of the yawning blackness in my mind and partly because so much of what I remember feels murky, untouchable. Like my memories are floating deep underwater and I can see only the shadow of what's there. The shadow of what used to be.

"I remember everything that happened with Lia," I finally say,

because it's true. "I remember being in the infirmary. I remember... building a snowman."

The memory warms me, and I smile at Jaxon, who smiles back—at least with his mouth. His eyes look as gravely concerned as ever.

"I remember Flint apologizing to me about trying to kill me. I remember—" I break off, press a hand to my suddenly hot cheek as I recall the sensation of fangs skating along the sensitive skin of my neck and shoulder before sinking home. "Jaxon. I remember Jaxon."

My uncle clears his throat, looking more than a little embarrassed himself. But all he says is, "Anything else?"

"I don't know. It's so—" I break off as one crystal-clear memory sweeps through my brain. I turn to Jaxon for confirmation. "We were walking down the hall. You were telling me a joke. The one about..." The clarity is fading, being replaced by the fuzziness that envelops so many of my memories right now. I fight through it, determined to hold on to this one clear thought. "No, that's not right. I was asking you the punch line. To the pirate joke."

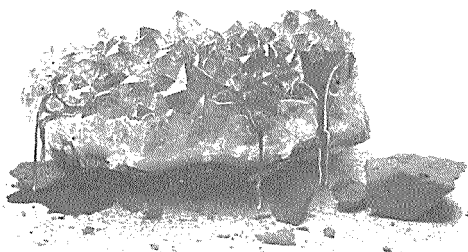
I freeze as another, much more chilling part of the memory becomes clear.

"Oh my God. Hudson! Lia did it. She brought him back. He was here. He was right here."

I look between Jaxon and Uncle Finn, searching for confirmation even as the memory swamps me. Drags me under. "Is he alive?" I ask, voice shaking under the weight of everything Jaxon has told me about his brother. "Is he at Katmere?"

Uncle Finn looks grim as he answers, "That's exactly what we wanted to ask you."

Turns out the Sixth Sense Is Actually Human Sacrifice



“Me? Why would I be able to answer that?” Except, even as I ask the question, another memory hits me. I look at Jaxon, who is full-on horror-struck by this point. “I got between you.”

“You did.” His throat works convulsively and his eyes, usually the color of a starless night, are somehow even blacker and more shadowed than I have ever seen them.

“He had a knife.”

“A sword, actually,” my uncle interjects.

“That’s right.” I close my eyes, and it all comes back to me.

Walking down the crowded hallway.

Catching sight of Hudson, sword raised, out of the corner of my eye.

Stepping between him and Jaxon because Jaxon is mine—mine to love and mine to protect.

The sword coming down.

And then...nothing. That’s it. That’s all I remember.

“Oh my God.” Horror swamps me as something new, and terrible, occurs to me. “Oh my God.”

“It’s okay, Grace.” My uncle moves to pat my shoulder again, but I’m already moving.

“Oh my GOD!” I shove the chair back, jump to my feet. “Am

I dead? Is that why I can't remember anything else? Is that why everyone was staring at me in the hallway? That's it, isn't it? I'm dead."

I start to pace as my brain wigs out in about twenty different directions. "But I'm still here with you. And people can see me. Does that mean I'm a ghost?"

I'm struggling to get my mind around that idea when something else—something worse—occurs to me.

I whirl on Jaxon. "Tell me I'm a ghost. Tell me you didn't do what Lia did. Tell me you didn't trap some poor person down in that awful, disgusting dungeon and use them to bring me back. Tell me you didn't do that, Jaxon. Tell me I'm not walking around because of some human-sacrifice ritual that—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jaxon bounds around my chair and takes hold of my shoulders. "Grace—"

"I'm serious. You better not have pulled any Dr. Frankenstein stuff to bring me back." I'm spiraling and I know it, but I can't seem to stop as terror and horror and disgust roil around inside me, combining into a dark and noxious mess I have no control over. "There better not have been blood. Or chanting. Or—"

He shakes his head, his longish hair brushing the tops of his shoulders. "I didn't do anything!"

"So I *am* a ghost, then?" I hold up my hands, stare at the fresh blood on my fingertips. "But how can I be bleeding if I'm dead? How can I—"

Jaxon grabs my shoulders gently, turns me to face him.

He takes a deep breath. "You're not a ghost, Grace. You weren't dead. And I definitely didn't perform a sacrifice—human or otherwise—to bring you back."

It takes a second, but his words, and the earnest tone he says them in, finally get through. "You didn't?"

"No, I didn't." He chuckles a little. "I'm not saying I wouldn't. These last four months have given me a shit ton more sympathy for Lia. But I didn't have to."

I weigh his words carefully, looking for loopholes as I hold them up against the suddenly crystal-clear memory of that sword connecting with my neck. “Didn’t have to because there’s another way to bring someone back from the dead? Or didn’t have to because...?”

“Because you weren’t dead, Grace. You didn’t die when Hudson hit you with that sword.”

“Oh.” Out of everything I’d braced myself to hear, that one didn’t even make the top ten. Maybe not even the top twenty. But now that I’m faced with that very logical although unlikely answer, I have no idea what to say next. Except: “So...coma?”

“No, Grace.” My uncle answers this time. “No coma.”

“Then what is going on? Because I may have giant holes in my memory, but the last thing I remember is your psychopathic brother trying to kill you and—”

“You stepping in to take the blow.” Jaxon growls, and not for the first time I realize how close his emotions are to the surface. I just hadn’t figured out, until right now, that one of those emotions is anger. Which I get, but...

“You would have done the same thing,” I tell him quietly. “Don’t deny it.”

“I’m not denying it. But it’s okay if *I* do it. I’m the—”

“Guy?” I cut him off in a voice that warns him to tread carefully here.

But he just rolls his eyes. “Vampire. I’m the *vampire*.”

“So, what? Are you trying to say that sword couldn’t have actually killed you? Because from where I stood, it looked to me like Hudson *really* wanted you dead.”

“It could’ve killed me.” It’s a begrudging admission.

“That’s what I thought. So what’s your argument, then? Oh, right. You’re the *guy*.” I make sure my voice is dripping with disdain when I say the last word. But it doesn’t last long as the adrenaline rush of the last several minutes finally passes. “So where *have* I been for four months?”

“Three months, twenty-one days, and about three hours, if you want to get specific,” Jaxon tells me, and though his voice is steady and his face blank, I can hear the torment in the words. I can hear everything he isn’t saying, and it makes me ache. For him. For me. For us.

Fists clenched, jaw hard, the scar on his cheek pulled tight—he looks like he’s spoiling for a fight, if only he could figure out who or what to blame.

I run a comforting hand back and forth across his shoulders, then turn to my uncle. Because if I’ve just lost close to four months of my life, I want to know why. And how.

And if it’s going to happen again.

Gargoyles Are the New Black



“**T**he last thing I remember is bracing for a blow from Hudson’s sword.” I glance from my uncle to Jaxon, both with their jaws clenched tight like they don’t want to be the one to tell me something. “What happened then? Did he cut me?”

“Not exactly,” my uncle tells me. “I mean, the sword connected, so yes. But it didn’t hurt you because you had already turned to stone.”

I play his words over and over in my head, but no matter how many times or ways I repeat them, they still make absolutely no sense. “I’m sorry. Did you say I turned to...”

“Stone. You turned to stone, Grace, right the fuck in front of me,” Jaxon says. “And you’ve been stone every single one of the last one hundred and twenty-one days.”

“What do you mean by ‘stone’ exactly?” I ask again, still trying to get my head around something that sounds impossible.

“I mean, your entire body was made completely of stone,” my uncle answers.

“Like I turned into a *statue*? That kind of stone?”

“Not a statue,” my uncle quickly reassures me, even as he eyes me warily, like he’s trying to decide how much more information I can take. Which a part of me can understand, even as it annoys the hell out of me.

"Please just tell me," I finally say. "Believe me, it's worse to be trapped in my head trying to figure this out than to just know. So if I wasn't a statue, I was...what?" I cast my mind around for some ideas, any ideas, but nothing comes.

And still my uncle hesitates, which makes me think that whatever the answer is, it's really, really bad.

"A gargoyle, Grace." Jaxon is the one who finally tells me the truth, just like always. "You're a gargoyle."

"A gargoyle?" I can't keep the incredulity from my voice.

My uncle shoots Jaxon a frustrated look but finally nods reluctantly. "A gargoyle."

"A gargoyle?" They can't be serious. They absolutely, positively, *cannot* be serious. "Like the things on the sides of churches?"

"Yes." Jaxon grins now, just a little, like he realizes how ridiculous all this is. "You're a gar—"

I hold up a hand. "Please don't say it again. The first two times were hard enough to hear. Just shhhh for a second."

I turn and walk toward the back wall of Uncle Finn's office. "I need a minute," I tell the two of them. "Just a minute to..." Absorb it? Deny it? Cry about it? *Scream?*

Screaming sounds really good about now, but I'm pretty sure it'll just freak out Jaxon and Uncle Finn more, so...

I breathe. I just need to breathe. Because I don't have a clue what to say or do next.

I mean, there's a side of me that wants to call them on the joke—so funny, ha-ha—but another, bigger part knows they aren't lying. Not about this. Partly because neither my uncle nor Jaxon would do that to me and partly because there's something deep inside me, something small and scared and tightly furled that just...let go the minute they said the word. Like it had known all along and was just waiting for me to notice.

For me to understand.

For me to *believe*.

So. Gargoyle. Okay. That's not too bad, right? I mean, it could be worse. I shudder. The sword could have chopped off my head.

I take a deep breath, rest my forehead against the cool gray paint of my uncle's office wall, and turn the word "gargoyle" over and over again in my head as I try to figure out how I feel about it.

Gargoyle. As in huge stone creature with wings and snarling fangs and...horns? Surreptitiously, I run a hand over my head, just to see if I've somehow grown horns and don't know about it.

Turns out I haven't. All I feel is my usual curly brown hair. Just as long, just as unruly, just as annoying as ever, but definitely no horns. Or fangs, I realize as I run my tongue over my front teeth. In fact, everything about me feels completely the same as it always has. Thank God.

"Hey." Jaxon comes up behind me, and it's his turn to rest a gentle hand on my back. "You know it's going to be okay, right?"

Sure. Of course. Totally no big deal. I mean, gargoyles are all the rage, right? Somehow, I don't think he'll appreciate my sarcasm, so in the end I bite it back and simply nod.

"I'm serious," he continues. "We'll figure this out. And on the plus side, gargoyles are totally kick-ass."

Absolutely. Giant, hulking pieces of stone. Totally kick-ass. *Not.* I whisper, "I know."

"You sure about that?" He scoots closer, ducking a little so that his face is really close to the side of mine. "Because you don't look like you know. And you definitely don't sound like it."

He's so close, I can feel his breath against my cheek, and for a few precious seconds I close my eyes and pretend it's four months ago, when Jaxon and I were alone in his room, making plans and making out, thinking we finally had everything under control.

What a joke that was. I've never felt more out of control in my life, even compared to those first days after my parents died. At least then, I was still human...or at least I thought I was. Now, I'm a gargoyle, and I don't have a clue what that even means, let alone how

it happened. Or how I managed to lose nearly four months of my life encased in rock.

Why would I do that, anyway? I mean, I get why I changed to stone—I'm assuming some latent impulse deep inside me came forward in an effort to stop me from dying. Is it really so far-fetched, considering I recently learned my dad was a warlock? But why did I stay stone for so long? Why didn't I come back to Jaxon the first chance I got?

I rack my brain, trying to come up with the answer, but there's still nothing there but a blank and empty chasm where my memories should be.

It's my turn to clench my fists, and as I do, my battered fingers start to throb. I glance down at them and wonder how I made such a mess of myself. It looks like I clawed my way through stone to get here. Then again, maybe I did. Or maybe I did something even worse. I don't know. That's the problem: I just don't know. Anything.

I don't know what I did for the last four months.

I don't know how it was possible for me to change into a gargoyle—or how it was possible for me to change back into a human.

And, I realize with a dawning horror that chills my very soul, I don't know the answer to the most important question of all.

I swing around to stare at my uncle. "What happened to Hudson?"

Vampire Roulette Isn't the Same Without the Blood



Uncle Finn seems to age right in front of me, eyes going dim and shoulders slumping in what looks an awful lot like defeat. “We really don’t know,” he says. “One second, Hudson was trying to kill Jaxon, and the next—”

“He was gone. And so were you.” Jaxon’s hand tightens reflexively on mine.

“She wasn’t gone,” Uncle Finn corrects. “She was just out of reach for a while.”

Once again, Jaxon looks unimpressed with his summation of events, but he doesn’t argue. Instead, he just looks at me and asks, “Do you really not remember any of it?”

I shrug. “I really don’t.”

“That’s so strange.” My uncle shakes his head. “We brought in every expert we could find on gargoyles. Every single one of them had conflicting stories and advice, but none of them even hinted that when you finally made it back, you wouldn’t remember where you’d been. Or what you’d become.” My uncle’s voice is low and, I’m sure, meant to be soothing, but every word he says just makes me more nervous.

“Do you think something’s wrong with me?” I ask nervously, looking between him and Jaxon.

“*Nothing* is wrong with you,” Jaxon snarls, and it’s as much a

warning to Uncle Finn as it is a reassurance to me.

"Of course there isn't," Uncle Finn agrees. "Don't even think that way. I'm just sorry we're not more prepared to help you. We didn't anticipate...this."

"It's not your fault. I just wish—" I break off as I run into that damn wall again. I push against it, but I can't seem to get it to break.

"Don't force it," Jaxon tells me, and this time he gently wraps an arm around my shoulders.

It feels good—*he* feels good—and I let myself sink in to him even as fear and frustration continue to circle inside me. "I *have* to push," I tell him, cuddling closer. "How else do we figure out where Hudson is?"

The heat is on, but I'm still freezing—I guess spending four months as stone will do that to a girl—and I run my hands up and down my arms in an effort to warm them.

Uncle Finn watches me for a few seconds, then mutters something under his breath as he waves a hand in the air. Moments later, a warm blanket settles around Jaxon and me.

"Better?" he asks.

"So much better. Thank you." I clutch it close.

He settles back against the corner of his desk. "To be honest, Grace, we were both terrified he was with you. And just as terrified he wasn't."

His last words hang in the air like a heavy weight for several minutes.

"Maybe *he was* with me." Just thinking about being trapped with Hudson has a huge lump taking up residence in the middle of my throat. I pause, force myself to swallow it down, before asking, "If he was with me, do you think... Did I bring him back with me? Is he here now?"

I glance between my uncle and Jaxon, and they both stare at me with what has to be intentionally blank faces. The sight turns my veins, my heart, *my very soul* to ice. Because as long as Hudson is running around, Jaxon isn't safe. And neither is anyone else.

My stomach churns sickly as I rack my brain. *This isn't happening. Please tell me this isn't happening.* I can't be responsible for letting Hudson loose again, can't be responsible for bringing him back where he can terrorize everyone and raise an army made of born vampires and their sympathizers.

"You wouldn't do that," Jaxon finally tells me. "I know you, Grace. You would never have come back if you thought Hudson was still a threat."

"I agree," my uncle eventually says. As he continues, I try to hold on to his words and not the silence that preceded them. "So let's operate under that assumption for now. That you only came back because it was safe to do so. That means Hudson is most likely gone, and we don't have to be worried."

And yet he still looks worried. Of course he does. Because no matter how much we all want to believe that Hudson is gone, there's one major flaw with their logic—mainly that they're both talking about me being here like I *decided* to come back.

But what if I didn't? If I didn't make a conscious choice to become a gargoyle all those months ago, maybe I didn't make a conscious choice to become human again now. And if that's the case, where exactly is Hudson?

Dead?

Frozen in stone in some alternate reality?

Or hiding out somewhere here at Katmere, just waiting for his chance to exact revenge on Jaxon?

I don't like the sound of any of the alternatives, but the last one is definitely the worst. In the end, I put it aside because freaking out won't do me any good.

But we have to start somewhere, so I decide to go along with Uncle Finn's assumption—mostly because I like it better than all the alternatives put together. "Okay. Let's assume that, if I had control of Hudson, I wouldn't have just let him go. Now what?"

"Now we chill out a little bit. We stop worrying about Hudson and

start worrying about *you*.” My uncle smiles encouragingly. “Marise should be here any minute and if, after she checks you out, she decides you’re healthy, then I think we should let things ride for a while. See what you remember in a few days, after you’ve eaten and had some rest and gotten back to a normal routine.”

“Let things ride?” Jaxon asks, his voice dripping with the same incredulity I’m feeling inside.

“Yes.” For the first time, there’s a hint of steel in my uncle’s voice. “What Grace needs right now is for things to go back to normal.”

I think he’s forgetting that having a psychopathic vampire on my ass has pretty much been the norm for me since I *got* to this school. The fact that we have apparently switched Lia out for Hudson just feels like par for the course at this point. Which is depressing, to say the least, but also true.

I swear, if I were reading this story, I’d say the plot twists were getting ridiculous. But I’m not reading it. I’m living it, and that is *so much worse*.

“What Grace needs,” Jaxon corrects, “is to feel safe. Which she won’t be able to do until we make sure Hudson isn’t a threat.”

“No, what Grace needs,” my uncle continues, “is routine. There’s safety in knowing what’s going to happen and when it’s going to happen. She’ll be better off—”

“Grace will be *better off*,” I interrupt as annoyance bubbles to the surface, “if her uncle and her boyfriend start talking *to* her instead of *about* her. Since I have a semi-functioning brain and, you know, agency in my own life.”

To their credit, they both look shamefaced at the verbal slap down. As they should. I may not be a vampire or a warlock, but that doesn’t mean I’m just going to lie down and let “the menfolk” make decisions about my life for me. Especially not when both of them seem to be of the “wrap Grace in cotton and protect her” opinion. Which also really isn’t going to fly with me.

“You’re right,” my uncle agrees in a much more subdued tone.

“What do *you* want to do, Grace?”

I think for a minute. “I want things to be normal—or at least as normal as they can get for a girl who lives with a witch and is dating a vampire. But I *also* want to figure out what happened with Hudson. I feel like we’ve got to find him if we have any chance at all of keeping *everyone* safe.”

“I’m not worried about keeping everyone safe,” Jaxon grows. “I’m just worried about keeping *you* safe.”

It’s a good line and, not going to lie, it melts me a little on the inside. But on the outside, I stay tough, because someone has to figure out this mess, and since I’m the only one with a front-row seat—even if I don’t remember what I saw from that seat—that someone is going to have to be me.

I clench my fists in frustration, ignoring the pain that shoots through my already abused fingertips as I do. This is important, really important. I have to remember what happened to Hudson.

Did I leave him chained up somewhere, a threat to no one?

Did he escape and that’s why my hands are so beaten up—because I tried to stop him?

Or—and I hate this idea the most—did he use his gift of persuasion on me and get me to just let him go? And if so, is that why my memory is shot to hell?

The not knowing is killing me, as is the fear that I’ve let everyone down.

Jaxon fought so hard to get rid of Hudson the first time. He sacrificed everything, including whatever love his mother had for him, in order to destroy his brother—and to keep Hudson from destroying the whole world.

How can I live with myself if we find out that I just let him walk away? That I gave him a chance to continue wreaking havoc on Katmere and the world?

That I gave him another chance to hurt the boy I love?

That thought more than any other feeds the fear inside me and

has me croaking out, “We need to find him,” in a voice hoarse with concern. “We need to figure out where he went and make sure he can’t hurt anyone else.”

And we need to figure out why I’m certain I’m forgetting something very important that happened during those four months.

Before it’s too late.

What I Don't Know Will Hurt Me... and Everyone Else



After Marise checks me over for what feels like hours, Uncle Finn finally lets Jaxon take me away. It's obvious from the way both men and Marise fretted over me that no one was taking my health for granted, which was comforting. Marise even checked me for a brain injury because, well, hello, amnesia.

But I am unbelievably healthy, minus some scrapes and bruises on my hands, and deemed fit to reenter Katmere Academy. Apparently, being stone for four months could be the next big health craze.

As Jaxon and I walk casually back to my room, though, my mind can't stop replaying a part of my conversation with Marise, when she was apologizing for not knowing more about gargoyle physiology.

"You're the first gargoyle to exist in a thousand years."

Fantastic. Because who doesn't want to be a trendsetter when it comes to their basic physiology? Oh, right. *Everyone.*

Not going to lie, I have absolutely no idea how to process the information that I'm the first modern-day one of my kind, so I file it away in a folder marked: "Shit I Don't Need to Deal with Today." And another one titled "Thanks for the Heads-Up, Mom and Dad."

Just then, I notice that Jaxon's not leading me to *my* room but to his tower rooms. I tug on his hand to get his attention. "Hey, we can't head to your rooms. I need to stop by mine for a few minutes;

then I want to take a quick shower and grab a granola bar before heading to class.”

“Class?” He looks shocked. “Wouldn’t you rather rest today?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve been ‘resting’ for the last four months. What I really want to do is get back to class and catch up on what I missed. I’m supposed to graduate in two and a half months, and I don’t even want to think about how many missing assignments I have.”

“We always knew you’d come back, Grace.” He smiles down at me and squeezes my hand. “So your uncle and teachers already have a plan in place. You just need to set up appointments to talk to them about it.”

“Oh, wow. That’s awesome.” I give him a tight hug. “Thank you for your help with everything.”

He hugs me back. “You don’t need to thank me. That’s what I’m here for.” He pivots, and we switch directions and head to my room. “Mrs. Haversham should have emailed your new schedule by now. It changed at the semester, even though...” His voice trails off.

“Even though I wasn’t here to change with it,” I finish, because I’ve just decided that I’m not going to spend the rest of the school year tiptoeing around my new reality. It is what it is, and the sooner we all learn to live with it, the sooner things will get back to normal. Myself included.

I’ve got a long list of questions to ask Jaxon and Macy about gargoyles. And once I get the answers, I’m going to start trying to figure out how to live with it gracefully. Tomorrow. On the plus side, the fact that I don’t have horns should make the graceful part a lot easier to bear.

Jaxon stares down at me, and I expect him to kiss me—I’ve been dying to kiss him from the moment he walked into my uncle’s office—but when I lean in to him, he subtly shakes his head. The rejection stings a little, at least until I remember just how many people were staring at me when I was walking through the halls earlier.

That was more than an hour ago. Now that word has probably gotten around that the resident gargoyle is human again, I can’t

imagine how many people will be watching us—even though class is supposed to be in session.

Sure enough, when we turn the corner into one of the side hallways, people are everywhere—and every single one of them is looking at us. I can feel myself tensing up before we've taken more than a step or two. They drop their eyes when Jaxon walks by, though.

Jaxon wraps an arm around my shoulders, then ducks his head until his mouth is almost pressed against my ear. "Don't worry about them," he murmurs. "Once everyone gets a look at you, things will settle down."

I know he's right—after my first couple of days here, no one paid any attention to me at all, unless I was walking beside Jaxon. There's no reason to think that will change now. Thankfully. Notoriety isn't exactly my speed.

We book it to my room, turning what's usually a ten-minute walk into one that's closer to five or six. And still it isn't fast enough. Not with Jaxon beside me, his arm around my shoulders. His long, lean body pressed against my side.

I need him to be closer, need to feel his arms around me and his soft lips on mine.

Jaxon must feel the same way, because once we hit the top of the stairs, his quick walk turns into something closer to a jog. And by the time we get to my room, my hands are trembling and my heart is beating way too fast.

Thank God Macy left the door unlocked, because I'm not sure Jaxon wouldn't have torn the thing off the hinges otherwise. Instead, he pushes open the door and ushers me through it, hissing only a little as Macy's enchanted curtain brushes against his bare forearm.

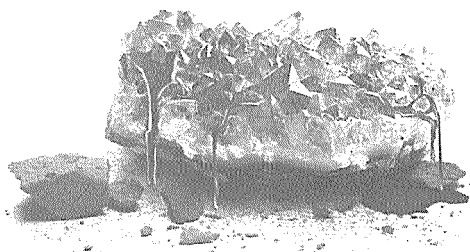
"Is your arm okay?" I ask as the door closes behind us. Jaxon is too busy pushing me up against it to answer.

"I missed you," he growls, lips barely an inch from my own.

"I missed y—" It's all I manage to get out before his mouth comes crashing down on mine.

8

Put a Little Love on Me



I didn't know.

I didn't know how much I missed this, didn't know how much I missed Jaxon, until this moment.

His body pressed against mine.

His hands cupping my face, fingers tangled in my hair.

His mouth devouring mine—lips and teeth and tongue lighting me up from the inside. Making me want. Making me *need*.

Jaxon. Always Jaxon.

I shift against him, desperate to get even closer, and he growls low in his throat. I can feel the tension in his body, can feel the same need in him that is burning deep inside me. But through it all, his hold remains gentle, his fingers stroking my hair instead of pulling, his body cradling mine instead of trying to invade my space.

"Mine." I whisper the word against his lips and he shudders, wrenching his mouth from my lips.

I whimper, try to pull him back, but he shudders again, buries his face in the bend where my shoulder and neck meet. And then he just breathes—long, slow, deep breaths—like he's trying to pull my very essence deep inside himself.

I know the feeling.

I slide my hands down to his waist, and as my hands skim over

him, I realize he really did lose weight while I was...gone.

"I'm sorry," I whisper against his ear, but he just shakes his head as he pulls me closer.

"Don't." He presses soft kisses along the length of my neck. "Don't ever apologize to me for what you went through. It's my fault that I didn't protect you."

"It's nobody's fault," I tell him, even as I tilt my head back to give him better access. "It just is what it is."

Tears suddenly burn my eyes. I blink them away, but Jaxon knows. His hands, already gentle, become downright tender as they stroke my arm, my shoulder, my cheek. "It's going to be okay, Grace. I promise."

"It's already okay." I swallow down the lump in my throat. "We're here, aren't we?"

"Yes." He presses a kiss to the sensitive spot behind my ear. "Finally."

My legs go liquid. Heat races through me. My heart trembles in my chest. Jaxon holds me up—of course he does—and murmurs, "I love you," as he gently scrapes his teeth over my collarbone.

And just like that, everything inside me freezes. My breath, my blood, even the need that's been burning inside me since he walked into my uncle's office. All of it...*gone*. Just like that.

Jaxon must feel it, because he stops immediately. And when he lifts his head, there's a wary, watchful look in his eyes that makes me feel like I did something wrong. "Grace?" he asks, shifting back a little so that he's no longer crowding me. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. I just..." I trail off because I don't know how to answer him, don't know what to say. Because I want him. I do. I just don't know how to deal with this weird, uncomfortable feeling that's building inside me all of a sudden.

"You just...?" Jaxon waits for an answer. Not in an aggressive way but in a concerned way, like he really does just want to make sure I'm all right.

But knowing that only makes the feeling inside me worse, the

pressure building until I feel like a rocket about to go off. “I don’t... I want... It feels...” I sound like a jerk fumbling around for an explanation, but then my stomach growls—loudly—and understanding replaces Jaxon’s concern.

“I should have kept my hands to myself until you had something to eat,” he says, taking another couple of steps back. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I needed to kiss you.” I squeeze his hand, glad to have an explanation for the weird feeling inside me. My mom always said that low blood sugar does strange things, and I can only imagine how low mine is right now, considering I haven’t eaten in nearly four months. “I’ll just grab one of Macy’s granola bars and then go to class. You probably have to head out soon, too, right?”

“Sure,” he says, but I can tell the light has dimmed in his eyes.

I know it’s my fault. I know he’s just being Jaxon and I’m the one who is suddenly acting all weird. But...I don’t know. Everything just feels off with me, and I don’t have a clue how to fix it.

I should probably lean forward so my hair brushes against Jaxon’s hand and he knows everything’s okay. Or at least lean into him for one more hug. But I don’t actually want to do either of those things, so I don’t. Instead, I smile up at him and say, “See you later?”

“Yeah.” He smiles back. “Definitely.”

“Oh, and for some reason, I’ve lost my phone. Meet back here?”

He nods, then gives me another little wave and heads out of my room and down the hallway toward the stairs.

I watch him go, admiring the way he walks, full of purpose and confidence and a come-at-me-at-your-own-risk insouciance that shouldn’t do it for me but somehow totally does. Also, I am completely admiring the hell out of what his very nice ass does for those boring black uniform pants.

Once Jaxon starts to go around the corner, I step back into my room, then kind of pause as he turns to look down the hall at me. He’s got a huge grin on his face now, and it looks good on him. As do the crinkles by the corners of his eyes and the lightness that seems

to cover his whole face.

The grin fades just a little as our eyes meet—almost like he’s embarrassed to be caught looking so happy—but it’s too late. I’ve gotten a glimpse at what Jaxon Vega looks like when he’s beaming, and it turns out I like it. I really, really like it.

The anxiety in the pit of my stomach dissolves as easily as it came, and suddenly it’s the easiest thing in the world to blow him the kiss I couldn’t give him earlier. His eyes widen at the gesture and, while he doesn’t do anything as corny as reaching out to grab it, he does wink at me.

I’m laughing as I close my door and head for the shower. How can I not when the Jaxon Vega I get to see is a million times sweeter and more charming than the one the world knows?

But as I turn on the water, a chill works its way through me. Because if it turns out I let Hudson escape, if it turns out I really did bring him back with me, then I’ll be the one responsible for hurting Jaxon and taking away his happiness.

No way am I going to let that happen to him. Not now. Not ever again.

9

Livin' on a Hope-Induced Hallucination



Three shampoos and two full-body scrubs later, I finally feel like a new woman. One who might not turn into a hulking stone monster at the least provocation. I wrap myself and my hair up in towels (hot pink, of course—thank you, Macy) and reach for my phone to check the time.

Which I can't do because *I don't have a phone*. Ugh.

Also, since there is no clock in the room and I don't have a phone, I'm feeling pretty grumpy as I slap moisturizer on my face and start to dry my hair.

The sad fact is, I'm going to have to get on this no-phone thing sooner rather than later. Partly because my entire life is on my phone and partly because I really, really need to text Heather. I can't even imagine what my best friend is thinking right now—except, of course, that I ghosted her for absolutely no reason.

Thankfully, my electronics are the only things missing. My backpack was apparently with me the entire time, and my school uniforms are right where I left them—in my closet. I take a minute to re-bandage my hurt fingers, then grab a black skirt and purple polo from my closet. I add a pair of black tights and my school boots, pause to slick a little lip gloss on my lips and mascara on my lashes, then grab my backpack and head for the door.

I don't know what time it is exactly, but Jaxon left here around noon. Which means I should have plenty of time to make my one o'clock class: Mystical Architecture.

I have no idea what kind of class this is, but the truth is I'm excited about it. Even though there's a part of me that wonders if I am now enrolled in it because I'm apparently a living, breathing example of mystical architecture.

Deciding not to dwell on the fact that I might be part of the props, I throw open my door and book it down the long dorm hallway, with its decorated doors and black sconces in the shape of different dragons. As always, I giggle a little as I pass the door decorated with bats.

The first day I got to Katmere, I assumed the room belonged to a Batman aficionado and thought it was the coolest. Now I know it's a vampire joke à la Jaxon's best friend, Mekhi, and I love it even more. Especially when I see that he's added a couple of new bat stickers.

I take the back stairs two at a time, my hand coasting along the elaborately carved banister as I do. I'm in such a rush to get to class, I don't notice a chunk of the banister is missing—and stairs—until it's too late and almost tumble through the hole.

I manage to catch myself, but as I do, I get an up-close look at the edges on either side of the gap. They're charred and blackened and look to be the victims of some kind of high-intensity fire. Someone obviously lost their temper...or at least lost control of their powers.

Dragon or witch? I wonder as I turn the corner into the north hallway where my architecture class is located. They're the only ones who can wield that kind of firepower. Which is cool but definitely a little scary, too.

Maybe I'm looking at this whole gargoyle thing all wrong. At least I don't have to worry about burning the school down when I'm a giant stone statue.

Warning chimes playing the Rolling Stones's "Sympathy for the Devil"—Katmere's version of a bell and Uncle Finn's own private indulgence—go off just as I slip through the doorway of my

architecture class. I try to get the lay of the land and to find an empty desk, but I barely have the chance to inhale a breath before I jump a little as I realize Flint is crowding in behind me.

He puts a steady hand on my shoulder even as a huge grin splits his face. “New Girl! You’re back!”

“You already knew that.” I roll my eyes at the greeting. “You saw me earlier.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t sure you weren’t some hope-induced hallucination earlier.” He wraps me in a huge hug and lifts me off my feet. “Now I know you’re real.”

“Why is that exactly?” I ask as he finally lets me down. He’s so warm, and I’m still so cold that I think about burrowing against him for a second hug. But this is the guy who tried to kill me not that long ago. Sure, he’s had the last four months to move on, but for me it feels like everything happened just a few days ago. Including him choking me out in the tunnels below the school.

But Flint just winks at me and says, “Because no one who doesn’t have to be here would ever come to this class.”

One Giant Pain in my Ass



“**F**antastic.” I give him my very best fake smile. “Because that doesn’t sound ominous at all.”

“Hey, I’m just keeping it real.” He leans in close. “You want another tip?”

“I didn’t realize there was a first tip,” I answer with a roll of my eyes.

This time when he smiles, his teeth gleam white and just a little sharp against his rich umber complexion, and I can’t help wondering how I missed it for so many days.

Everything about the boy screams “dragon,” from the way he moves to the way his eyes track my every movement. And that’s not even including the large ring on his right ring finger that I’ve never seen him take off—at least not in human form. It’s literally a bright-green stone with a dragon etched into it set in an elaborate silver base.

“I’m going to ignore your lack of enthusiasm, New Girl, and tell you anyway. Because that’s just the kind of guy I am.”

“So magnanimous,” I agree with a click of my tongue, although I can’t keep the humor from leaking into my gaze. Staying mad at Flint is starting to feel impossible. “Or, wait. I think I mean murderous. Sorry.” I deliberately widen my eyes. “I always confuse those two words.”

Flint's cheeks flush just a little, and his expression shifts to a combination of embarrassed and impressed as he leans over and whispers, "Me too."

I meet his eyes. "I remember."

"Yeah, I know." He looks sad, but he doesn't try to argue with me. Doesn't try to pretend I don't have the right to be wary around him. Instead, he just nods toward the desks and says, "You might want to grab a seat in the back."

"Why is that exactly?" I ask.

Flint just shakes his head, and his signature big grin stretches across his face again. He holds his hands out in a half-conciliatory, half-do-what-you-want kind of motion. "Sit in the front for a day if you must. You'll figure it out."

I want to ask more, but the final bell rings, and everyone is rushing for a seat—as far back from the front as they can get.

So it was a real tip, then, and not just Flint's way of messing with me. Too bad I'm a little slow on the uptake, because now nearly all the seats in the back are taken.

Figuring the front can't be *that* bad, I start to make my way over to the row against the wall—the second seat is open, and it seems like as good a bet as any.

I'm almost there when a slender arm, bedecked in crystal enhancing bracelets, shoots out to stop me. "Oh my God, Grace!" Macy's friend Gwen beckons me over to sit next to her.

"Welcome back," she practically shouts at me as I slide into the desk in front of her. "Have you seen Macy yet? She's going to flip!"

She shoves a lock of her long, shiny black hair behind her ear as she talks, and when it falls right back into her face again, she makes an exasperated noise and leans forward to pull an antique hair clip—also crystal enhanced—out of her bag.

"I haven't seen her yet. My uncle said she's been taking a midterm since I..." I trail off awkwardly, as I have no idea how to finish that sentence.

Since I got back?

Since I became human again?

Since I stopped being a gargoyle?

Ugh. What a mess.

Gwen smiles sympathetically, then whispers something in Chinese to me. The look on her face tells me it's something special, but I don't have a clue if it's a spell or a blessing or something in between.

"What does that mean?" I whisper back as the architecture teacher, a Mr. Damasén, according to my schedule, lumbers into the room. He's a huge man—seven feet at least—with long red hair tied back at the nape of his neck and ancient gold eyes that seem to see everything.

Instinctively, I sit a little taller and notice everyone else in the class does the same—except for Flint, who currently has his long legs kicked up on his desk like he's on a lounge in the middle of the Bahamas.

Mr. Damasén zeroes in on him, his eyes doing this weird swirling thing that totally freaks me out. But Flint just keeps grinning that lazy, dragon grin of his and even raises his hand in a little half wave, half salute.

At first, I think the teacher is going to bite his head off—maybe even literally—but in the end, he doesn't say a word. He just kind of shakes his head before giving the rest of the students in the classroom a quick once-over.

"It's a Chinese proverb my mother used to tell me all the time when I was growing up and struggling to figure out my powers and my place in the witchcraft world. 'If heaven made someone, earth can find some use for them.'" Her bracelets clink together in a surprisingly soothing rhythm as she leans forward slightly and pats my forearm. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You'll figure it out. Just give yourself some time."

Her words are right on. So right on, in fact, that they freak me out a little bit. I really don't like the idea of the entire school knowing how I'm feeling. I thought I'd done a good job of keeping my emotions under wraps, but now I'm really doubting that belief, considering this is only the second time Gwen and I have ever talked.

“How did you know?”

She smiles. “I’m an empath and a healer. It’s kind of what I do. And you’ve got every right to be freaked out right now. Just try to breathe through it until you get your feet under you.”

“Fake it till I make it?” I joke, because that’s pretty much been my mantra since I got to Katmere Academy.

“Something like that, yeah,” she answers with a quiet laugh.

“Miss Zhou.” Mr. Damasén’s voice booms across the classroom like a lightning strike, rattling everything in its path—including his students’ nerves. “Care to join the rest of the class in turning in your review packet for the midterm? Or are you not interested in obtaining those points?”

“Of course, Mr. Damasén.” She holds up a bright-orange folder. “I have it right here.”

“Sorry,” I whisper, but she just winks at me as she gets up to add her file to the stack at the front of the room.

“As for you, Miss Foster, it’s nice to have you back.” I jump as Mr. Damasén’s voice thunders so loudly, it practically rattles my eyes back in my head. He’s made his way down my aisle and is now standing right in front of me, a textbook in his hand. “Here’s the book you’ll need for my class.”

I reach for it gingerly, trying to keep my ears as far away from his voice as I can, just in case he decides he has something else to say. I now understand exactly what Flint was warning me about. Too bad I can’t run down to the nearest drugstore and pick up a pair of earplugs before next class.

Turns out keeping my ears as far out of range as possible was a good move on my part, because I’ve barely got the textbook in my hands before he continues. “But you’ve chosen to return on the day we’re taking the class midterm—something you are obviously ill-equipped for. So after I get everyone started on the test, come up to my desk with Mr. Montgomery. I’ve got a job for the two of you.”

“Flint?” His name pops out before I even know I’m going to say

it. "Doesn't he have to take the test?"

"Nope." Flint pretends to buff his nails on his shirt before blowing on them in the universal gesture for *I've got this*. "The person with the highest grade in the class is exempt from the midterm. So I am free to help with whatever you may need." The grin he shoots me as he says the last word is absolutely wicked.

I'm not about to argue with my teacher on my first day of class, so I wait while Mr. Damasen hands out thick test packets to everyone else in the room. Only after he's answered the numerous questions that go along with the test do I make my way up to his desk at the front of the class, Flint hot on my heels. I can feel everyone staring at us—staring at me—and my cheeks burn in response. But I'm determined not to let anyone know that they're getting to me, so I just look straight ahead and pretend Flint isn't standing so close that I can feel his breath on my neck.

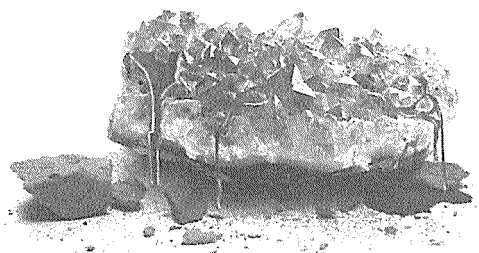
Mr. Damasen grunts when he sees us and reaches into the top drawer of his desk to pull out a yellow envelope. Then, in a voice that I'm pretty sure he thinks is a whisper but is really more like a near-shout, he tells us, "What I need you to do is go around the school and take pictures of everything on this list and return the photos to me within two weeks. I need to use them as references on an article I'm writing for May's edition of *Giant Adventures*." He looks back and forth between us. "Your uncle said it wouldn't be a problem."

Trust Uncle Finn to try to fix everything—typical. "No, no problem, Mr. Damasen," I say, mostly because I don't know what else *to* say.

He hands it to me, then waits a little impatiently for me to open it. "Any questions?" he asks in a thundering timbre the second I set eyes on the list.

About a hundred, but most of them have nothing to do with what I'm supposed to photograph. No, my questions are all about how I'm supposed to spend the next hour and a half with the boy who, not very long ago, wanted me dead.

11



Just Call Me Stone-Coldhearted

“Are you okay with this?” Flint asks after we’ve gotten to the hallway. For once, he’s not joking around as he asks. In fact, he looks deadly serious.

The truth is, I’m not sure if I’m okay or not. I mean, I know Flint isn’t going to hurt me again—with Lia dead and Hudson who knows where, there’s absolutely no reason for Flint to try to kill me to keep me from being used in Hudson’s bizarre resurrection. At the same time, I’m not super excited about rushing off to some of the (very) isolated places on that list with him, either. Fool me once and all that...

Still, an assignment is an assignment. Plus, if my doing this means I don’t have to eventually take the midterm, I’m all for finding a way to make it work.

“It’s fine,” I tell him after a few awkward seconds go by. “Let’s just get it done.”

“Yeah, sure.” He nods at the list in my hand. “Where do you want to start?”

I hand the stack of papers over to him. “You know the school better than I do. Why don’t you choose?”

“Happy to.” He doesn’t say anything else as he starts perusing the list. Which should be a good thing—I mean, the last thing I want is for Flint to think we’re good friends again. But at the same time, I

don't like the way this feels, either.

I don't like the distance between us. I don't like this serious Flint who isn't joking around and teasing me. And I really, really don't like that every minute we spend in this hallway seems to make things more awkward and not less.

I miss the friend who roasted marshmallows for me in the library. Who made a flower for me out of thin air. Who offered to give me a piggyback ride up the stairs.

But then I remember that that friend never really existed, that even when he was doing all those things, he was also plotting to hurt me, and I feel even worse.

Flint keeps glancing at me over the top of Mr. Damasen's list, but he doesn't say anything. And that only makes everything feel even more off, until the silence stretches between us, taut and fragile as an acrobat's wire. The longer it goes on, the worse it gets, until, by the time Flint finally finishes reading the list, I'm about to jump out of my skin.

I know he feels it, too, though, because this boy in front of me isn't the same one who teased me when he first walked into the classroom today. His voice is more subdued, his attitude more hesitant. Even his posture is different. He looks smaller and less confident than I've ever seen him when he says, "The tunnels are on this list."

His words hang in the air, haunting the space between us. "I know."

"I can do them myself if you want." He clears his throat, shuffles his feet, looks anywhere but at me. "You can photograph something else on the list, and I can run down to the tunnels and take the pics Mr. Damasen needs really quick."

"I can't take any pics on my own. I lost my phone in the whole..." Instead of saying the word out loud, I wave my hand in what I hope he understands to mean *gargoyle debacle*.

"Oh, right." He clears his throat for what feels like the fourth time in a minute. "I mean, I can still go down to the tunnels alone. You can just wait here, and then we can do the rest of the castle together."

I shake my head. “I’m not going to make you do that.”

“You’re not *making* me do anything, Grace. I offered.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t ask you to offer. I’m the one getting a grade on it, after all.”

“True, but I’m the one who was a complete asshole, so if you aren’t fine going down to those damn tunnels with me, then I totally get it, okay?”

I rear back at his words, a little shocked by his sudden *mea culpa* but also a little pissed off about how flippant he sounds, like there’s something wrong with me for wanting to protect myself. Even knowing he felt like he didn’t have a choice—even knowing that he probably couldn’t have killed Lia without setting off a war between dragons and vampires—doesn’t absolve him of what he did.

“You know what? You *were* a total asshole. Beyond an asshole, actually. I’m the one still sporting scars on my body from your talons, so why the hell are *you* suddenly the one standing here looking all sad and wounded? You’re the one who was a terrible friend to me, not the other way around.”

His eyebrows slash down. “You think I don’t know that? You think I haven’t spent every day of the last four months thinking about all the ways I fucked you over?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what you’ve been doing for the last four months. I’ve been stuck as a damn statue, in case you’ve forgotten.”

And just like that, all the fire seems to leave him, and his shoulders slump. “I haven’t forgotten. And it really fucking sucks.”

“It does suck. This whole mess sucks. I thought you were my friend. I thought—”

“I was your friend. I *am* your friend, if you’ll let me be one. I know I already apologized to you, and I know there’s nothing I can say or do to make up for what I did—no matter how many punishments Foster gave me. But I swear, Grace, I’ll never do anything like that again. I swear I’ll never hurt you again.”

It’s not the words themselves that convince me to give him another

chance, though they are pretty persuasive. It's the way he says them, like our friendship really matters to him. Like he misses me as much as I'm finding out that I miss him.

It's because I do miss him, because I don't want to believe that all those moments that meant something to me didn't also mean something to him, that I make what may be my worst mistake yet. Instead of telling him to go to hell, instead of telling him it's too late and I'll never give him another chance, I say, "You better not, because if you ever pull anything like that again, you won't have to worry about killing me. Because I promise, I'll get to you first."

His whole face breaks out into that ridiculous grin I've never been able to resist. "Deal. If I try to kill you again, you can totally try to kill me back."

"There won't be any *try* about it," I tell him with my best pretend glare. "Only death. *Your* death."

He places a hand over his heart in mock horror. "You know what? You say that with a lot of conviction. I actually think you mean it." Contrarily, his grin only gets bigger.

"I do mean it. Want to test me out?"

"No way. I was in the hallway the day you turned to stone. I saw what happened to Hudson," Flint says. "You've become a total badass, Grace."

"Excuse me, but I have always *been* a badass. You were just too busy trying to kill me to notice." It's pretty hard to look down your nose at someone taller than you, but here, in this moment with Flint, I'm proud to say I manage it.

"I'm noticing now." He waggles his brows. "And I definitely like it."

I sigh. "Yeah, well, don't like it too much. This"—I gesture back and forth between the two of us—"is still a probationary thing. So don't mess it up."

He puts his hands on his hips, his stance wide like he's bracing for a blow he's totally willing to take. "I won't," he says. And he sounds surprisingly serious.

I hold his gaze for a minute and then nod, the smile I've been fighting since I saw him again finally crinkling my eyes. "Good. Now, can we please get back to the project? Or are we going to stand out here talking about our feelings all day?"

"Wow." He gives me a fake wide-eyed look. "Turn a girl into a gargoyle and suddenly she's all kinds of stone-coldhearted."

"Wow." I return his look with one of my own. "Turn a boy into a dragon and suddenly he's all kinds of ridiculous."

"That's not my dragon, baby. That's all me."

I roll my eyes but can't stop myself from grinning at his goofiness. It's really good to be able to joke with him again. "I hate to break it to you, *baby*, but I'm pretty sure it's the both of you."

Flint pretends to swoon, and I take the opportunity to yank the list of photography subjects out of his hands. I'm smart enough to know if I don't get the boy on task soon, there's no way we're going to finish this. And since I can use all the points I can get, we really, really should start moving.

Except, as I peruse the list again—this time with a much clearer head—I realize that we've got a giant problem. "Some of the things he wants us to take pictures of are way up high. There's no way we'll be able to get a picture of them good enough to use for research."

But Flint just winks at me, that wicked grin of his on full display. "You *do* remember dragons can fly, right?"

Oh, hell no. I shake my head. "I'm sorry, but our tree of trust is still just a twig. No way am I letting you take me up into the sky."

He laughs. "Fine, spoilsport. We'll focus on the easy ones today. But one of these days soon, I'm totally taking you flying."

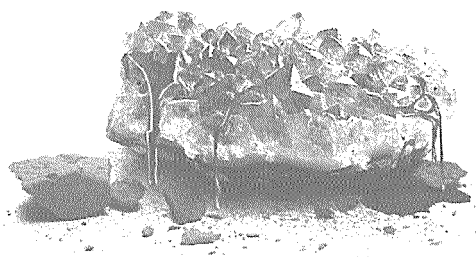
I shiver and almost remind him he *has* taken me flying before—in his talons—but I don't want to break our newfound truce. "That'll take some convincing."

"I live to serve, my lady," he says as he drops into an elaborate bow, and I can't help but laugh. He is so ridiculous that it's hard to take him seriously.

I jokingly try to shove his shoulder, but damn, maybe he's the gargoyle here. He's definitely hard enough to be made of stone. "Come on, give me your phone and let's get started, you big dork," I joke, and Flint quickly hands me his cell. But as I turn around, I find Jaxon watching us with eyes that have turned to flat black ice.

12

#FactionFightClub



“F finished with class already?” Jaxon asks, looking at me with a vague hint of what-the-fuck.

“Oh, no.” I take a sizable step away from Flint—not because Jaxon has said or done anything to make me uncomfortable but because I can only imagine how I’d feel if I were just walking around the school and found him cuddled up with a super-hot, super-charming dragon. No matter how innocent it was. “It’s just the class is taking a midterm, and Flint is exempt, so the teacher volunteered him to help me with an outside project I can do for the same points.”

Flint casually leans a massive shoulder against the stone wall, crossing his arms and ankles as though he hasn’t a care in the world. Jaxon’s gaze stays steady on me.

“That’s awesome. Less of that makeup work you were worried about, right?” Jaxon asks with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Then again, I’m probably being paranoid.

“Exactly. I just hope all the teachers are as cool as Mr. Damasén.”

“Damasén?” Jaxon repeats with a startled bark of laughter. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard anyone refer to him as cool.”

“Right?” Flint interjects. “I told her the same thing. The man’s a monster.”

Jaxon doesn’t answer him. In fact, he doesn’t even *look* at him.

Which isn't awkward at all.

"Well, I liked him. I mean, sure, he talks really loudly, but I don't see what the big deal is."

"He's a giant."

"I know, right?" My eyes widen as I picture the architecture teacher. "I think he's the largest person I've ever seen."

"Because he's a *giant*," Jaxon reiterates, and this time it's impossible to miss the emphasis he puts on the last word.

"Wait a minute." I can feel my mind stretching in an effort to internalize what he's saying. "When you say 'giant'...you don't mean 'big human.' You mean..."

"Giant." The remaining coldness melts from his eyes and is replaced by an amused warmth that finally has the tension leaking from my shoulders.

"Like the whole 'Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman' thing... That kind of giant?"

"More like the I-eat-babies kind of giant, but yeah. I guess the *Jack and the Beanstalk* reference works."

"Really?" I shake my head as I try to wrap my mind around this new revelation.

"Seriously, Grace," Flint reiterates. "Damasen's a giant. Has a whole stack of bones from problem students in his apartment to prove it."

My head whips around to Flint. "*What?*"

"But don't worry," he continues. "Foster doesn't let him eat any of the good students, so you should be fine."

Flint puts a valiant effort into keeping a straight face as I stare at him in horror, but in the end, he can't do it. He starts to grin, but the moment I narrow my eyes at him, the grin turns into a full-blown belly laugh.

"Oh my God. You should have seen your face." He glances at Jaxon like he wants to share the joke, but Jaxon still won't even look at him. What seems like sadness creeps into Flint's gaze, but he hides it with a

big, goofy grin so quickly that I can't help wondering if I saw it at all.

"You're so mean!" I tell Flint and elbow him in the side. "How could you do that to me?" I turn to Jaxon. "Is Damasen even really a giant?"

"Yes, he's a giant. But no, he doesn't eat people." He pauses, then finally glances at Flint. "Anymore."

"*Anymore?*" I recoil in horror, at least until I see a tiny gleam in the corner of Jaxon's eye. "Oh my God! *That* was totally uncool. Why are you two messing with me like that?"

"I thought that was my job as your boyfriend," Jaxon tells me, but he's smiling when he says it.

"To freak me out?"

"To tease you." He reaches up, wraps one of my curls around his finger.

"Pretty sure he's just looking to make a point, Grace." Flint drapes a nonchalant arm around my shoulders and gives Jaxon a look that even I know is provoking as hell. "He wasn't happy to find out you might let me take you for a ride."

"Flint!" My mouth drops open for the second time in as many minutes. "Why would you say it like that?" I whirl to Jaxon. "He means dragon. I might ride his dragon!"

Flint waggles his brows. "Exactly."

I'm so embarrassed by my unintentional double entendre that I'm sure my face is beet red. "Flint! Stop!"

I don't have a chance to get him to clarify, though, because quick as a lightning strike, Jaxon lashes out...and punches Flint right in the mouth.

Sucker Punch Me One More Time



For several long seconds, the whole world seems to go in slow motion.

Flint's head slams back on his neck, so hard that he stumbles away several steps.

In the meantime, Jaxon lowers his arm and tilts his head just a little, eyes narrowed on Flint while he waits to see what his former best friend decides to do.

And I just stand there in the middle of the two of them, head swiveling back and forth as I try to figure out what I'm supposed to do next. Yell at Jaxon? Yell at Flint? Walk away and let the two of them kill each other because, seriously? Testosterone, ugh.

Before I can make a decision one way or the other, Flint rights himself. I hold my breath, expecting him to launch at Jaxon right here in the middle of the hallway. But, as usual, he surprises me. Instead of lashing out with hands or fists or fire, he just reaches up and rubs the blood off his lower lip as he stares Jaxon down, a wicked gleam in his eyes that I can't quite identify.

And when he does finally speak, his words are as unexpected as the rest of his reaction. "You surprise me, Vega. You never used to be one to go for the sucker punch."

Jaxon just raises an eyebrow. "Perhaps you should look up that

definition, Montgomery. It's not a sucker punch when you know it's coming. And deliberately provoke it."

Flint laughs, but he doesn't look away. Neither does Jaxon, who matches him look for look. There are so many undercurrents between these two big guys, I feel like I might get sucked under, too. I stand here, trying to understand what's really going on, what I missed. Because I definitely missed something. And then I decide that I don't actually care. If the two of them want to go around beating their chests and each other, I'm not going to stop them. But I'm sure as hell not going to watch, either.

"You know what? While you two figure out whatever this is"—I wave an arm back and forth between them—"I'm going to go finish my assignment. I'll find you later to return your phone, Flint."

I turn to walk away without saying anything specific to Jaxon, which apparently is what finally gets his attention. He catches up with me and stops my indignant march by wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me in to his side. "You don't need to borrow his phone anymore," he tells me, lips against my ear.

It's the wrong thing to say to me right now, and the look I give him says exactly that. "I'm borrowing his phone, Jaxon, not 'riding his dragon.'" I use exaggerated air quotes to highlight just how ridiculous this whole thing is. "It's no big deal."

Jaxon sighs. "I don't care if you use Flint's phone or not. I just thought you might want to use your own instead." He uses his free hand to pull a phone from the front pocket of his backpack, then holds it out to me.

I look from him to the phone and back again. "That's not my phone. Mine is in a beach case, and it..." I stop talking as the truth hits me. "Wait a minute. Are you saying you bought me a new phone?"

He gives me an "obviously" kind of look.

"When? I've been trying to figure out how to find one when we live in the middle of nowhere, and you not only managed to get me one in an hour, you did it while you were taking a midterm? How is

that even possible?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I’ve been here longer? I know all the tricks?”

“Obviously. But you could have just taught me your trick. Then I could have gotten my own phone.”

“I don’t mind buying you a phone, Grace. Consider it a welcome-home present.”

“You already got me a welcome-home present. You.” I rest my head on his shoulder, bury my nose against his strong, warm throat as I try to figure out what I want to say. He still smells like oranges and fresh water, and as I breathe him in, it calms the anxiety in my stomach that I didn’t even know was there.

“I guess I don’t want you to feel like you’ve got to buy me things. Because you don’t.” I pull away just enough to look into his eyes. “You know that, right?”

He shakes his head, gives me a confused look. “O-kay.”

Flint is still within earshot—and probably watching us walk away—so Jaxon pulls me into an alcove a few feet ahead. “What brought this on?”

I search for the right words as it strikes me again how little we actually know each other. “I wasn’t raised to spend money like you. The pendant and now—” I glance down at the phone still in his hand. “A brand-new, latest-edition iPhone. It’s a lot, and I just don’t want you to think I’m with you because of what you can buy me.”

“There’s a lot to unpack in that sentence, so I’m going to need a couple of minutes to unravel it all. But first—” He slips the new phone into my jacket pocket, then takes Flint’s out of my unresisting hand and leans out of the alcove into the hallway again.

“Hey, Montgomery!” He waits until Flint turns to look at Jaxon with an expectant expression on his face and yells, “Think fast,” as he tosses the phone to him in a perfect, curving arc. Flint flips him off even as he catches it, which makes Jaxon laugh.

I swear, I’m never going to understand these two.

He's still laughing when he turns back to me, and for a moment, I can't help thinking about the boy I met four months ago. He never laughed, he never smiled, and he definitely didn't joke around. He hid his heart behind a scowl and his scar behind his too-long hair, and now look at him.

I'm not vain enough to think I'm responsible for all of it, but I'm grateful that I got to play a part in pulling him out of the darkness. In saving Jaxon as much as he's saved me.

"Okay, now, back to what you were saying," Jaxon tells me as we continue walking and make the turn that will take us to the entryway. "First of all, this probably sounds incredibly douchey, but it is what it is. Money isn't something I spend a lot of time thinking about. I've lived a long time and I've got a lot of it and that's just the way it is. And honestly, you may not think so, but I've been really restrained so far."

I reach into my pocket and pull out the thousand-dollar-plus phone he just gave me. "This is restrained?"

"You have no idea." The little half shrug he gives me is all kinds of sexy. "I'd buy you the world if you'd let me."

I start to make a joke that he already has, but the look on his face is too serious for that. As is the way he reaches down and clutches my hand like it's a lifeline. Then again, I hold on to him the exact same way, this boy who makes me feel all the things, all the time.

"Jaxon..."

"Yeah?"

"Nothing." I shake my head. "Just Jaxon."

He smiles, and as our eyes meet, I swear I forget how to breathe. I don't actually pull it together until he says, "Come on, let's finish taking some of those pictures before the bell rings."

"Oh, right. The pictures."

"You sound so enthusiastic." He shoots me the side-eye as we walk around a corner, and both his brows are raised. "They are important, right? I mean, you weren't going to ride Flint for some other reason, were you?"

“What?” I whip my head around, ready to tell him off, only to find him silently laughing at me. “Ugh. You did that on purpose.”

“Did what?” he asks, all innocent except for the wicked glint in his eyes that he doesn’t even try to hide.

“You’re a—” I try to pull away, but he wraps an arm around my shoulder and holds me tight against him. Which leaves me with only one course of action: I elbow him right in the stomach.

Of course, he doesn’t even flinch. He just laughs harder and answers, “I’m a...?”

“I don’t even know anymore. I just...” I shake my head, throw up my hands. “I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do with you.”

“Sure you do.”

He leans in for a kiss, and it should feel like the most natural thing in the world. I’m in love with this boy, he’s in love with me, and I positively adore kissing him. But the second his mouth gets within range, my entire body stiffens of its own accord. My heart starts beating fast—but not in a good way—and my stomach starts to churn.

I try to hide it, but this is Jaxon, and he’s always seen more than I want him to. So instead of kissing me the way I know he wants to, he shifts a little and presses a soft, sweet kiss to my cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. I hate what’s going on inside me, hate that we can’t just pick up where we left off four months ago.

I hate even more that I’m the one driving this wedge between us when Jaxon has been nothing but wonderful.

“Don’t be. You’ve been through a lot. I can wait.”

“That’s the thing. You shouldn’t have to.”

“Grace.” He brings a hand up to cup my cheek. “You spent one hundred and twenty-one days frozen in stone to keep all of us safe. If you think I can’t wait as long as it takes for you to feel comfortable being back with me again, then you really don’t have a clue how much I love you.”

My breath catches in my throat, along with my heart and, quite possibly, my soul. “Jaxon.” I can barely get his name past the huge

lump right above my vocal cords.

But he just shakes his head. “I’ve waited an eternity for you, Grace. I can wait a little longer.”

I lean in to kiss him, and just like that, the sweetness between us turns to something else. Something that has my palms sweating and fear coating my throat.

She-Nanigans



My stomach bottoms out, tears well up in my eyes, and I forget how to breathe.

Because it's not how long Jaxon will wait that I'm worried about. It's whether or not I'll ever be ready for him again. Whether I'll ever find my way back to this beautiful boy who stole my heart so easily. So completely.

And I can't help but wonder exactly what it is inside me that's making me feel this way. Sure, there've been times before when I heard a voice, warning me of danger, telling me what to do in situations where I was completely out of my depth. Situations that I'd never before imagined being in.

Back then, I'd been so sure that the voice was just random thoughts, things picked up on subconsciously that my conscious mind hadn't quite registered until that moment. But now I wonder, could it be my gargoyle voice? Flint mentioned once that his dragon was sentient, that it had thoughts separate from his human form. Is it the same with gargoyles?

Out of nowhere, an irrational anger wells up inside me. At the gargoyle inside me. At Lia and Hudson. At fate itself for orchestrating everything that's brought us to this point.

I open my mouth to say I don't know what—something, anything

that might explain to him the weird feelings rioting inside me—but he shakes his head before I can get so much as a word out.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not—”

“It is,” he answers firmly. “You’ve been back all of four hours. Why don’t you cut yourself some slack?”

Before I can say anything else, the chimes go off again.

Seconds later, students in purple-and-black uniforms flood the common areas. They give us a wide berth—Jaxon’s with me, so of course they do—but that doesn’t mean they aren’t staring at us. Aren’t whispering behind their hands as they pass by, gawking at the two of us like we’re mannequins on display.

Jaxon reluctantly pulls away. “What’s your next class?” he asks as he drops my hand.

“Art. I was going to run up to my room and change so I could take the trail outside.”

“Good.” He steps back, his dark eyes filled with understanding. “Let me know when you do plan on taking the shortcut. You shouldn’t have to do that alone. At least not the first time.”

I start to tell him it’s no big deal but stop myself. Because it *is* a big deal.

And because I don’t want to go down there alone right now, don’t want to walk by the doorway that leads to the place where I almost became an actual human sacrifice, courtesy of the murderous Lia and her even more murderous boyfriend, Hudson.

So instead of protesting, I just say, “Thank you,” and stretch up on my tippy-toes to give Jaxon a kiss on the cheek.

A huge screech sounds from several feet away that startles us apart.

“AHHHHHH! GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAACE!”

Because I’d know that screech anywhere, I shoot Jaxon a rueful smile and take a couple of steps back, right before my cousin, Macy, slams straight into my side.

She wraps her arms around me like a limpet and practically jumps

up and down as she squeals, “You’re really here! I wouldn’t let myself believe it until I saw you! I’ve been looking for you *everywhere!*”

Jaxon winks at me and mouths, *Text me later*, before moving back into the passing horde.

I nod as I turn to embrace Macy, even going so far as to do the up-and-down tippy-toe/jump thing with her. And as she wraps me in a giant hug, I can’t help but be grateful for her. Can’t help but think just how much I’ve missed her, even though I didn’t know it until right this second.

“How are you? Are you okay? How are you feeling? You look good. What class do you have right now? Can you skip it? I’ve got about a gallon of Cherry Garcia ice cream squirreled away in my dad’s freezer—I’ve been stockpiling it for weeks, just waiting for you to come back!”

She pulls away and grins at me, then leans back in and hugs me again even more enthusiastically. “I’m so glad you’re back, Grace. I’ve missed you so much!”

“I’ve missed you, too, Mace,” I say as she finally lets me go. And because I have no idea which of her eight million questions/comments to start with, I say the first thing that pops into my head. “You changed your hair.”

“What? Oh yeah.” She grins at me as she runs a hand through her short pink pixie cut. “I did it a few weeks ago when I was missing you. Kind of an homage, you know?”

Of course it’s an homage, because she still thinks hot pink is my favorite color... “It looks fabulous,” I tell her. Because it does. And because she’s pretty much the greatest cousin and friend a girl could ever wish for.

“So what class do you have next?” she asks, tugging me across the foyer toward the staircase. “Because I think you should blow it off and come hang in the room with me.”

“Don’t you have a class now, too?”

“Yes, but it’s just a review for the midterm on Friday.” She waves

a hand in the air. "I can skip it to hang with my favorite cousin."

"Yeah, but your favorite cousin has art right now, and I don't think I should skip it. I need to find out if there's something I can do to make up for everything I missed." I eye her ruefully. "I am not prepared to repeat my senior year."

"If you ask me, you shouldn't have to make up anything. I mean, hello. Saving the world should get you straight A's, like, forever."

I laugh, because it's impossible not to when Macy is on a roll. And she is very definitely on a roll right now. "I wouldn't exactly call it saving the world."

"You got rid of Hudson, didn't you? It's close enough."

My stomach tightens. That's the thing. I don't know if I got rid of Hudson or not. I don't know if he's dead or off plotting his next act of world domination or trapped somewhere in between the two. And until I do know, I feel really shady letting anyone think I did something that might have helped "save the world."

For all I know, I made everything worse.

"I have no idea where Hudson is right now," I confess eventually.

Her gaze widens, but she catches herself and plasters a smile back on her face. "He's not here, and that's good enough for me." She hugs me again, a little less enthusiastically this time. "So what do you say? Cherry Garcia in the room?"

I glance at the new phone Jaxon gave me, note that I only have about fifteen minutes to make it to art at this point. And I do want to go, despite how tempting it is to crash in our room and have Macy fill me in on everything that's happened.

"How about we compromise?" I say, shoving my phone back into my pocket. "I go to art, you go to your last class, and we meet back in the room at five for ice cream?"

She quirks one brow at me. "You're going to show up, right? You're not going to blow me off for the resident vampire in chief?"

I burst out laughing all over again, because of course I do. How can I not when Macy is at her ridiculous best? "I'm going to tell Jaxon

you called him that.”

“Go ahead.” She rolls her eyes. “Just make sure you do it *after* Cherry Garcia. I have so much to catch you up on! Plus, I want to hear all about what it’s like to be a gargoyle!”

I sigh. “Yeah, me too.”

“Oh, right. Dad told me you were having memory issues.” Her face falls, but her frown lasts only a few seconds before she shrugs it off. “Fine, you can tell me all about what it was like to be reunited with your mate.” Her eyes take on a dreamy cast. “You’re so lucky to have found Jaxon so young. Most of us have to wait much longer.”

Mate. The word goes off like a gong inside me, reverberating into every corner of my being. I haven’t actually thought about it since I’ve been back. But now that Macy has brought it up, I have about a million questions surrounding it. I mean, I know Jaxon is my mate, but it’s always been a really abstract thing. I’d just learned the term before I became a gargoyle and hadn’t really had time to think about it before I ended up frozen in stone.

Because the idea of being so far behind the curve makes me uncomfortable, I decide to ignore the word—and my feelings about it—until I actually have time to talk to Macy and Jaxon. Or at least time to run to the library and look it up myself.

“I’ve got to go,” I tell Macy, and this time, I’m the one to hug her. “I’m going to be late for art as it is.”

“Okay, fine.” Her answering hug is as enthusiastic as always. “But I will be in the room—with ice cream—at exactly four fifty-nine. I expect you to be there.”

“Scout’s honor.” I hold my hand up in what I think is a close facsimile of the three-fingered pledge.

Macy isn’t impressed, though. She just shakes her head and laughs. “Don’t let Jaxon talk you into any shenanigans between now and then.”

“Shenanigans?” I repeat, because just when I think Macy can’t get more ridiculous—and fabulous—she does something to change my mind.

“You know exactly what I mean.” She lifts her brows up and down suggestively. “But if you want, I can spell it out for you in the middle of the foyer here. You shouldn’t let Jaxon take you up to his tower to have his—”

“Okay, I got it!” I tell her as my cheeks burn.

But she said the last loud enough to be heard halfway to Jaxon’s tower, and as a result, there are a whole lot of snickers going on around us. “Art. I’m going to art. Now.”

But as I make my way to my room to change and then hustle out the side door into the frigid March air, I can’t help but wonder if Jaxon’s even going to try to “shenanigan” me again. And what about my gargoyle is so against it.

Let's All Play Find the Homicidal Maniac



Art goes really well—Dr. MacCleary waives the first two assignments of the semester and gets me right to work on my third—a painting that reflects who I am inside. And since art has always been the thing that helps me figure out the world, it's definitely an assignment I can get behind.

Normally, I'd spend a bunch of time planning out the composition and light source, but after an hour of sketching a bunch of nonsensical nothingness, I decide, *Screw it*. I pick up a brush and spend the last half an hour of class giving my subconscious free reign on the canvas. What it comes up with—for now—is a swirling dark-blue background that looks a lot like if Van Gogh and Kandinsky had a baby.

Not my usual style, but then neither is dating a vampire and turning into a gargoyle, so...I'm just going to go with it.

At one point, I need to wait and let some of the colors dry a bit, so I grab my laptop from my backpack and log in to my wireless-provider account and activate my new phone. Minutes later, *dozens* of texts flood my screen.

I frantically begin scrolling through the texts from Heather that start with “How're you doing?” then move on to more concerned texts to a final, sad, “I hope you haven't texted back cuz you're so busy loving your new school. Just know I'm here if you ever need a

friend. And I'd love a ping just to know you're alive."

I am officially the worst friend ever. My hands are shaking a little as I finally send a much-needed text to Heather.

Me: OMG I am soooooooooo sorry.

Me: Long story. Lost my phone and Alaska shuts down in the winter

Me: Jut got a new one and I'm so sorry. FaceTime this week?

I don't know what more I can say other than, *The shitty friend award clearly goes to me*. I hate that I can't tell her the truth, but I hate the idea of losing her even more. I just hope she texts back when she sees my message.

I put my phone in my backpack and return to my painting, which I think is the beginning of a room or something.

Other than that, art is completely uneventful—and so is the walk back to my dorm room. Thankfully. I mean, yeah, people are still staring at me, but sometime in the last hour and a half, I've decided to take the screw-it approach to more than just my art. So when I pass a group of witches who don't even bother to lower their voices as they talk about me—proof that mean girls really do exist everywhere—I just smile and blow them a kiss.

What do I have to be embarrassed about anyway?

I make it back to my dorm room by 4:31 and figure I'll have ten minutes to start my "Find the Homicidal Maniac" to-do list before Macy gets back, but the second I open the door to our room, I get showered with a spray of confetti.

I shake off the colorful pieces of paper as I close the door behind me, but I'm smart enough to know I'm going to be pulling it out of my curls for the rest of the night—maybe even longer. And still, I can't help grinning at Macy, who is already dressed in a purple tank top and her favorite pair of pajama pants—tie-dyed rainbow, of course. She's cleared off her desk and covered it with a spare sheet (also rainbow), before setting up a smorgasbord of ice cream, Skittles, and Dr Peppers with licorice straws.

"I figured, if we were going to celebrate your return, we were going to do it in style," she tells me with a wink, right before she hits play on her phone and Harry Styles's "Watermelon Sugar" fills the room.

"Dancel!" she shouts, and I do, because Macy can get me to do all kinds of things I would never do for anyone else. Plus, the song reminds me so much of my first night at Katmere that I can't resist. It's wild to think that was almost four months ago. Wilder still that it somehow feels so much longer and also way shorter than that.

When the song finally finishes, I kick off my shoes and collapse on my bed.

"Um, I don't think so. It's facial time—I have these new masks I'm dying to try out," Macy says as she grabs my hand and tries to drag me off the bed. When I refuse to budge, she sighs and walks over to the bathroom sink. Then adds over her shoulder, "Come on. One of us *was* solid stone for nearly four months."

"What does that mean?" I ask as a horrible thought occurs to me. "Does being a gargoyle do something to your skin?"

Macy lowers the array of sheet masks she's been studying like they're a map to the Holy Grail. "What makes you think that?"

"I mean, I've seen a lot of Gothic cathedrals in my time. Gargoyles aren't exactly the prettiest creatures."

"Yeah, but you don't look like a monster." If possible, she seems even more confused.

"How would you know? I probably have horns and claws and who knows what else." I shudder at the thought—and at the knowledge that Jaxon saw me like that.

"You do have horns, but they're adorable."

I sit straight up. "Wait. You saw me?"

I don't know why, but I'm a little appalled at that revelation. I mean, did they just leave me on display in the middle of the hallway or something? My breath catches as another horrible thought comes to mind. Does every mean girl in the school have a picture of me on their phone?

“Of course I saw you. You’ve been in a back room of the library for months, and before that you were in my dad’s office.”

My shoulders sag in relief. Oh, right. That makes a lot more sense.

I tell myself not to ask, that it doesn’t matter. But in the end, curiosity gets the best of me and I can’t help myself. “What did I look like?”

“What do you mean? You looked like a gar—” She stops, her eyes narrowing in indignation. “Wait a minute. Are you telling me neither Jaxon nor my dad showed you what you look like as a gargoyle?”

“Of course they didn’t show me. How could they when I’m...” I hold up my hands and swivel them around in a demonstration that I’m human and not stone.

“Seriously?” She rolls her eyes. “Do you think I didn’t take at least a dozen pics of you? My badass gargoyle cousin? Give me a break.”

“Hold on. You actually took *pictures* of me?”

“Of course I did. You’re, like, the coolest creature in existence. Why wouldn’t I?” She reaches for her phone. “Want to see?”

My stomach flutters a little, butterflies waking up for a reason that has nothing to do with Jaxon or Katmere Academy and everything to do with what might possibly be in that picture. I know I shouldn’t get upset about what I look like when it’s so not important in the grand scheme of things. But I can’t help it. I apparently have *horns*.

“Yeah. Yeah, I really do.”

I close my eyes and reach for the phone.

As I do, I take a deep breath, hold it for the count of five, and blow it out slowly.

Then I take another breath and do the same thing.

When I’m finally ready for whatever monstrosity is going to be waiting for me—or as ready as I can be—I open my eyes and stare at my picture.

Nothing Wrong with Being a Little Horny



My heart explodes the second I see the picture Macy selected because—holy shit—I really am a gargoyle. I think, up until right now, there was a tiny part of me that didn't believe it.

But there I am, in all my gargoyle glory.

And while I am still totally freaked out by this revelation, even I have to admit, I'm nowhere near as hideous as I was afraid I would be.

Thank God.

In fact, as it turns out, me as a gargoyle doesn't look like much of a monster at all. In fact, I look an awful lot like...me. Same long curly hair. Same pointy little chin. Even the same big boobs and ridiculously short stature. It's me...just made of light-gray stone.

I mean, yeah, there are a few additions. Like the short horns at the top of my head that curl back just a little. The giant kick-ass wings that are almost as big as I am. The relatively short claws at the ends of my fingers.

But—and believe me, I look closely—there is *not* a tail. Thank you, universe.

I can deal with the horns. Not happily, but I can deal with them, as long as I don't also have to deal with a tail.

Macy gives me a minute, several minutes actually, before she finally says, "See, you look amazing. Total badass."

“I look like a statue.” I raise one brow. “Although I guess I could wait out a fight and win that way. Eventually. Boredom be thy sword.”

Macy shrugs as she picks up a can of Dr Pepper and drinks it through a strawberry Twizzler straw. “I’m sure gargoyles have all sorts of cool powers.” She waves a hand, and a second Dr Pepper floats across the room to me.

“See?” I pluck my drink out of thin air and take a long sip—also through the Twizzler straw because, while I might be a gargoyle, I’m not a total animal. “You can do cool things like wiggle your fingers and get a full face of makeup. All I can do is—”

“Save the world?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m pretty sure that’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

“And I’m pretty sure you don’t know enough about who and what you are to decide if it’s an exaggeration or not. Grace, being a gargoyle—” She breaks off, blows out a long breath, even as she runs a hand through her bizarre pink hair. “Being a gargoyle is, like, the coolest thing ever.”

“How would you know? Marise told me there hasn’t even been one for a thousand years.”

“Exactly! That’s what I’m saying. You’re one of a kind! Isn’t that awesome?”

Not really, no. Being the center of that kind of attention has never exactly been my vibe. But I’ve come to know Macy—and the current look on her face—well enough to know that there’s no use arguing with her about this.

Still, I can’t stop myself from saying, “‘Awesome’ might be a little bit of an exaggeration.”

“No, it’s not. Everyone thinks so.”

“And by everyone, you mean you and your dad?” I joke.

“No, I mean *everyone*! They’ve all seen you and—” She breaks off, suddenly becoming incredibly interested in her soda.

Which seems like it bodes badly for me. Very, very badly. “Exactly how many people have seen me, Macy? You said I was in your dad’s

office and then tucked away in the library.”

“You were! But you’ve got to understand: you were frozen in stone for almost *four months*. Dad and Jaxon nearly lost their minds with worry.”

“I thought you said being a gargoyle is cool.”

“Being a gargoyle *is* cool. Being stuck as a gargoyle...not so much. They tried everything to get you to turn back—and ‘everything’ meant consulting as many different experts around the world as they could find. And the experts all wanted to see you, because they didn’t believe you were a gargoyle. They thought you’d been cursed by a witch or a siren or something. And then, when word got out that you really were a gargoyle...well, they all demanded to see you before they would consult.”

I get up and start to pace the room. “So, what? They all just flew to Alaska to get an in-person chance to examine me?”

“Of course they did!” She shoots me an exasperated look. “I feel like you’re not fully comprehending the whole only-one-in-existence thing. The experts would have flown to the moon, if that’s where they had to go to see you. Not to mention, Jaxon and my dad would have flown them to the moon *themselves* if they thought it would help you.”

I get that. It even makes a twisted kind of sense to me. And yet I still can’t get over feeling squicked out at people I don’t know examining me when I was totally out of it. And Jaxon and my uncle allowing it.

It’s not even that I don’t understand why they did it. I think about if my parents had survived that car accident and were in comas or something. If they needed medical care, I would have done anything I could to make sure they got it.

Not going to lie, though. It just feels like one more thing I’ve lost. And one more thing I couldn’t afford to lose.

I stop pacing and sink back onto my bed in defeat.

“Grace?” Macy comes over to sit next to me, and for the first time since we ran into each other in the foyer, she looks concerned. “Are

you okay? I know this is a lot, but I swear, it's a good thing. You've just got to give it a chance."

"What about my memory?" I swallow the lump in my throat, because I don't cry in front of people, even my best friends. "What if it never comes back? I know I was turned to stone, and maybe the reason I don't remember anything is because there's nothing to remember."

She shakes her head. "I don't believe that."

"That's just it. Neither do I." I start to speak half a dozen times, then stop myself just as many because nothing I'm going to say feels right.

Macy's quiet for a moment before she reaches over to squeeze my hand. "Let's just take it one day at a time for a couple of days. See what shakes loose as you settle into a routine. I promise, it's going to be all right." She smiles encouragingly. "Okay?"

I nod, the knot that's been in my stomach for hours finally beginning to dissolve. "Okay."

"Good." She gives me a wicked little grin. "Now, let's put on some of these face masks. I'll fill you in on the gossip you missed, and you can tell me all about what it's like to be mated."

Tunnel Vision



I can't sleep.

I don't know if it's because I've spent the last four months sleeping or if it's because of everything that's happened today. Maybe it's a combination of both.

Probably it's a combination of both.

Losing your memory will do that to a girl. So will finding out that the boy you're in love with, your *mate*, is the boy—the man—you're going to spend the rest of your life with.

Macy was all excited about it, going on and on about how lucky I am to have found Jaxon when I'm seventeen years old. I don't have to go through jerks like Cam (apparently, she and Cam broke up, badly, while I was busy being a statue) while I wait, and I don't have to worry about never finding my mate (apparently, this happens more frequently than it should). I have a mate and, according to Macy, that's pretty much the best thing I could ask for, better certainly than being human again. Better even than getting my memory back.

Mates are forever, after all, while almost nothing else is—or so she told me over and over and over again last night.

And I get it. I do. I love Jaxon. I have pretty much from the beginning. But is that because I love him or because of the mating bond,

which supposedly has been in place from the moment we first touched?

Which means, what? That first day, near the chess table, when he was being so awful to me and I rested my hand against his scarred cheek, that's when we mated? Before either of us had a clue about the other? Before either of us even *liked* each other?

I swallow a lump in my throat. Before either of us even had a choice?

For now, I refuse to focus on the fact that he knew from that first touch but never told me. Once again, I file that tidbit in my "Shit I Don't Have Time for Today" folder—which I'm beginning to think might need its own filing cabinet before this mess is done.

Instead, I try to wrap my head around having a mate in the first place. I mean, I get it in concept. I've read enough urban fantasy and YA novels to understand the mating bond is the best thing that can happen to two people. But to go from that to understanding it as a real thing that has happened between Jaxon and me... It feels like a lot.

Then again, all of this feels like a lot.

Too much for me to sleep, anyway. Maybe too much for me to handle at all. I don't know.

I grab my phone and notice Heather texted me back earlier. I let out a slow breath as I read her message. She wants to FaceTime later next week, and I quickly shoot off a reply that it's a date. Next, I spend a few minutes thumbing through a news site, catching up on everything I missed in the world the last four months. Turns out I missed a lot. Eventually, though, I grow bored with the news and set my phone on my chest and stare at the ceiling.

But I can't just lie here all night letting the gargoyle thing, the memory thing, and the mating thing all run through my head on a continuous loop.

I'd watch TV, but I don't want to disturb Macy. It's late, close to two in the morning, and she has a midterm tomorrow. Which means I need to get out of here.

I roll off the bed, trying to make as little noise as possible, then

grab a hoodie from my closet—the castle can be cold and drafty at night. Next, I slip on my favorite pair of daisy-patterned Vans and tiptoe to the door as quietly as I possibly can.

I have a moment's hesitation when I go to pull open the door—the last time I wandered the castle alone in the middle of the night, I nearly got tossed outside in the snow. I definitely do *not* want that to happen again. Mate or no mate, I can't go around expecting Jaxon to rescue me whenever I get into trouble.

Not that I imagine he'll be all that thrilled to rescue me anyway tonight. Especially since I canceled my plans to meet up with him, claiming exhaustion.

But things are different now than they were four months ago. No one's got any reason to try to kill me, for one. And for another, even if they wanted to, no one would ever deliberately go after Jaxon Vega's mate. Especially not after Jaxon nearly drained Cole for trying to drop a chandelier on me.

Plus, I'm a gargoyle now. If someone tries to hurt me, I can always just turn to stone. As exciting as that sounds. Of course, I have absolutely no idea how to do that. But that's a problem for another day, already filed away.

Before I can reconsider, I'm out of my dorm room and down the hall to...I'm not sure where yet. Except my feet seem to know what my brain doesn't, because it isn't long before I'm standing at the opening to the narrow hallway that leads to the tunnel entrance.

Part of me thinks I'm ridiculous for going in here alone—or at all, for that matter. Just this afternoon, I avoided heading this way with Flint because of all the bad shit that happened the last time I was down here.

But I'm not dressed to go outside, and suddenly the only thing I really want to be doing is working on my art piece. The only way to get to the art room right now is to go through the tunnels, so...it looks like I'm about to get up close and personal with the site of my almost demise.

Figuring the best way to get through the tunnels is just to get through them—no side trips, no detours—I make my way down the ever-narrowing, ever-darkening hallway as fast as I possibly can. My heart is pounding in my chest, but I don't let it slow me down.

I finally make it to the dungeon-like cells, with their creaking hinges and ancient chains. Since I'm alone and there's no one around to rush me, I let myself stop and look them over for a minute. At night, alone, they're even creepier than they are during the day. And they're plenty creepy then.

There are five cells in a row, each one equipped with an iron-barred door. Each door has an ancient padlock threaded through its latch bar, but each of the padlocks is closed (with no keys in sight) so there's no chance of anyone getting locked in the cells by accident... or, for that matter, not by accident.

The cells themselves are made of giant stones, each one about the width of a dragon's foot (or at least the width of Flint's foot, since he's the only dragon I've ever seen), and I wonder if there's a reason for that or if my imagination is just running wild. Either way, the stones are black and craggy and more than a little ominous-looking.

Then again, everything about the cells is ominous-looking—especially the three sets of shackles driven deep into the wall. Judging by the age of this place and the condition of the padlocks themselves, I would expect the shackles to be in pretty rough shape, too.

But they're not. Instead, they're a blindingly bright silver, free of any rust or sign of age. Which, not going to lie, makes me wonder how old they are. And why on earth Katmere Academy—which is run by my uncle, for God's sake—might have need of shackles thick enough to hold a rampaging dinosaur. Or, you know, a dragon, werewolf, or vampire...

Because thinking about it takes me along a disturbing path, one I'm not ready to go down tonight, I tell myself there must be a reasonable explanation—one that *doesn't* involve locking students up in a freezing dungeon for who knows how long.

Figuring I'm going to lose my nerve if I stay here any longer debating this, I take a deep breath and step into the fifth cell, which is the only one with the extra door that leads to the tunnels.

As I do, I brush a hand over the padlock on the door, just to make sure it's securely locked and no werewolf can come along and trap me in the tunnels.

Except, the moment my fingers brush against the lock, it clicks open...and falls out of the door latch straight into my hands.

Not quite the confidence builder I was looking for, especially considering I know it was locked. I know it.

Totally creeped out now, I slip the lock into the pocket of my hoodie—there's no way I'm putting it on the door until I'm safely back from the art cottage and heading to bed. Then I bend over and plug in the code Flint taught me for the tunnel door all those months ago.

I enter the last digit and the door swings open, just like it has every other time I've gone down here. But every other time I've been with someone else, and somehow that's made it less creepy.

Unless I concentrate on the fact that two of the four people I've been in the tunnels with literally tried to kill me here. Then it seems like pretty good odds that I'm by myself.

Deciding I either need to stop freaking myself out or go back to bed, I walk through the door. And try to ignore that all the candles in the sconces and chandeliers are still lit.

Then again, it's a good thing they are. Because it's not like I can just flip a switch and flood the place with light. Even though I want to. The bone chandeliers look a million times creepier now that I know they're actually real bones and not some cool student-made art project.

For a second, I think about forgetting the whole thing. About heading back to my room and to hell with the tunnels. Staring at the ceiling above my bed has to be better than making my way through Katmere's very own version of the Paris Catacombs on my own.

But the need to paint has been growing exponentially in me since I left my room a little while ago, until I can practically feel the paint

brush in my hand. Until I can practically smell the pungent oil of the paints on my canvas.

Besides, if I let these tunnels—and the memories they hold—run me out of here now, I don't know if I'll ever again work up the nerve to come back.

With that thought in mind, I pull out my phone and swipe open the music app I downloaded earlier. I choose one of my happy playlists—Summertime (Un)Sadness—and “I’m Born to Run” fills up the silence around me. It’s hard to be scared when American Authors are singing about how they want to live their life like it’s never enough. Talk about an anthem tailor-made for this situation.

So in the end, I do what they suggest. I run. And not some little jog, either. I run my ass off, ignoring how the altitude makes my lungs feel like they want to explode.

Ignoring everything except the need to get through this damn creep-fest as fast as I possibly can.

I don't slow down until I'm running at a slant up the tunnel that leads to the art cottage. Once I finally make it to the unlocked door, I shove it and practically trip over my feet in my haste to get inside.

The first thing I do is reach for the light switch just to the left of the door. The second thing I do is slam the door shut as hard as I can and flip the lock. I know Dr. MacCleary says she always keeps the door open in case one of her students is inspired, but as far as I know, she didn't just narrowly escape being a human sacrifice. I figure that gives me at least a little bit of leeway.

Besides, if someone else is actually ridiculous enough to want in here tonight, they can knock. As long as I know for sure they aren't trying to kill me, I'll be happy to let them in.

Sure, maybe I'm being paranoid. But I wasn't paranoid *enough* four months ago, and all that got me was a vacation I can't remember and my very own set of horns.

That's not a mistake I'm going to make a second time.

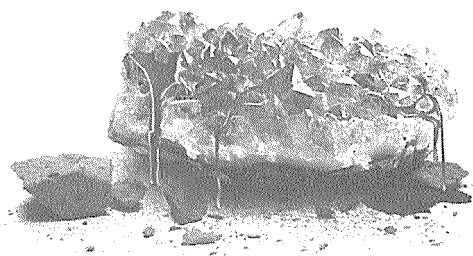
After spending a minute just catching my breath, I grab the paints

I need and head into the classroom. I've already got a really clear idea of what I want the finished background to look like—and what I need to do to get it there.

With any luck, the monsters of Katmere Academy will hold off trying to kill me long enough for me to get something done. Then again, the night is young.

18

I Think I Had Amnesia Once... or Twice



“Come on, Grace, wake up. You’re going to miss breakfast if you don’t get up soon.”

“Sleepy,” I mumble as I roll onto my stomach and away from Macy’s annoyingly cheerful voice.

“I know you’re sleepy, but you have to get up. Class starts in forty minutes and you haven’t even had a shower yet.”

“No shower.” I grab my comforter and pull it over my head, making sure to keep my eyes closed so I won’t be blinded by the hot-pink fabric. Or give Macy the idea that I’m actually awake. Because I very definitely am *not*.

“Graaaaaace,” she whines, tugging on the comforter as hard as she can. But I’ve got a death grip on the thing, and I’m not about to let it go anytime soon. “You promised Jaxon we’d meet him in the dining hall in five minutes. You *have* to get up.”

It’s the mention of Jaxon that eventually breaks through my dazed stupor and allows Macy to pull my comforter down. Cold air rushes against my face, and I make a half-hearted grab for the covers, still without opening my eyes.

Macy laughs. “I feel like our roles are suddenly reversed here. I’m the one who’s supposed to be hard to get out of bed.”

I make another lunge for the comforter and this time end up

grabbing onto a corner of it. "Give me," I plead, so tired I can't imagine actually getting out of bed. "Gimme, gimme, gimme."

"No way. The History of Witchcraft waits for no woman. Now, move it." She gives one more mighty yank, and the covers go flying off my bed completely.

I jackknife into a sitting position in response, prepared to beg if I have to. But before I can even get a sad-sounding *pleeeeeeease* out, Macy is grabbing on to my shoulders.

"Oh my God, Grace! Are you all right?" She sounds near tears as she frantically runs her hands over my shoulders and back and down my arms.

Her obvious panic clears the last of the foggiest from my brain. My eyes fly open, and I focus on her face, which looks even more terrified than she sounds.

"What's wrong?" I ask, glancing down at myself to see what's got her so worked up, then freeze the second I see the blood drenching the front of my purple hoodie. My heart is suddenly pounding in my throat as panic seizes my breath.

"Oh my God!" I jump out of bed. "Oh my God!"

"Stop moving! I need to see!" she tells me, grabbing on to the bottom of my hoodie and pulling it over my head in one fell swoop, leaving my tank underneath. "Where does it hurt?"

"I don't know." I pause, try to take stock of what's going on in my body, but nothing hurts. At least nothing that should warrant this kind of blood loss.

Another quick glance down shows me that my tank is solid white—no blood. Which means... "It's not mine."

"It's not yours," Macy says at the exact same time.

"Then whose is it?" I whisper as we stare at each other in horror.

She blinks up at me. "Shouldn't *you* know that?"

"I should," I agree as I still pat my arms and stomach for soreness.

"But I don't."

"You don't know how you're covered in *blood*?" she asks

incredulously.

I swallow. Hard. “I have absolutely, positively no idea how it happened.”

I rack my brain, trying to remember walking back from the art cottage last night, but I just draw a blank. There’s not even a giant wall, like what happens with the rest of the memories I can’t access. It’s just...empty. There’s absolutely nothing there.

Which isn’t terrifying at all.

“So what do we do now?” Macy asks in a voice smaller than I’ve ever heard from her.

I shake my head. “You mean you don’t know?”

She looks at me like my head just spun around three times and I’m one second away from spitting pea soup. “Why would I know?”

“I don’t know. I guess... I mean—” I bring my hands up to shove hair out of my face, then freeze as I realize they’re streaked with blood, too. And so are my forearms. I’m not going to panic. I’m not going to panic. “What do you normally do when things like this happen here?”

Now she’s looking at me like I actually *did* spit pea soup. “Um, I hate to break it to you, Grace, but things like this don’t happen here—at least not when you aren’t around.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Fantastic. That makes me feel so much better, thanks.”

She lifts her hand in a “what do you want me to say?” gesture.

Before I can answer her, my phone dings with a long series of text messages. We both turn to stare at it as one.

“You should get that,” Macy whispers after a second.

“I know.” Yet I make no move toward my desk, where it’s currently charging.

“Do you want me to get it for you?” she asks when it dings three more times.

“I don’t know.”

Macy sighs, but she doesn’t argue with me. Probably because she is at least as afraid as I am to find out who’s texting me. And why.

But we can't hide forever, and when a third string of messages comes in, I bite the bullet and say, "Fine, get it, please. I don't want to..." This time I'm the one who holds my hands up—my bloody hands.

I want to wash off, am dying to wash off, but every police procedural I've ever seen is running through my head right now. If I do wash up, is that destroying evidence? Will it make me look more guilty?

I mean, it sounds awful, but I am currently covered in someone else's blood and have no idea how it happened. Call me pessimistic, but it sounds like a road map to prison to me.

And I know I should be concerned about who I might have hurt but, well, sue me that I don't feel bad if someone attacked me in the tunnels and I fought back. I have rights.

I groan. Why did that sound like I was practicing for my defense already?

"Oh no," Macy says after swiping onto my messaging app. "They're from Jaxon. Oh *no*..."

"What's wrong?" I demand, forgetting about evidence as I all but leap across the room. "Did I hurt him? Is this his blood?"

"No, you didn't hurt him."

Relief whips through me so fast that I go a little light-headed. Still, it's obvious from her face that Jaxon had something awful to tell me. "What?" I finally whisper when the silence between us gets to be too much to bear. "What happened?"

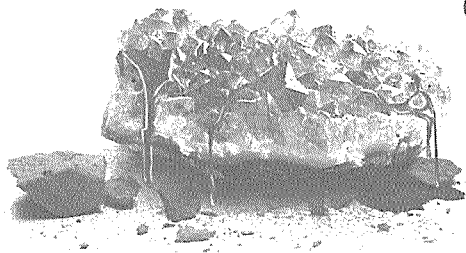
She doesn't look at me, instead scrolling up and down as though she wants to be certain she read the messages correctly. "He texted to apologize for missing breakfast. He's in my father's office."

"Why is he there?" I ask, dread pooling in my stomach even before Macy looks up from the phone with haunted eyes.

"Because Cole was attacked last night. It looks like he'll be okay after a day or two in the infirmary, but..." She takes a deep breath. "Someone drained him of a whole lot of blood, Grace."

19

Caught Red-Handed



“Cole?” I whisper, my hand going to my throat at the mention of the alpha werewolf.

Macy answers grimly, “Cole.”

“I couldn’t have.” I glance down at my blood-streaked hands with a new kind of horror. “I wouldn’t have.”

I think, until this very moment, I was holding out for this being some kind of horrible feeding accident with Jaxon. Like, maybe this actually *was* my blood because I’d gone to his room last night and he’d bitten into an artery or something and then sealed it up like he did last time, after the flying-glass incident.

I mean, of course, if I’m being reasonable, I know Jaxon would *never* be careless enough to bite into an artery of mine to begin with. He definitely wouldn’t leave me lying in bed, drenched in my own blood. And he sure as hell wouldn’t drop me into a sleep so deep that trying to get out of it felt like what I imagine surfacing from a coma would. But still, I think I would rather have all those things be true than to find out that this is another person’s blood I’m covered in. And that I might have been the one spilling it.

“I know you wouldn’t do anything to Cole,” Macy soothes, but the look in her eyes says otherwise.

Then again, the look in my eyes probably does, too. Because while

I can't imagine under what circumstances I would decide to attack an alpha werewolf—and then actually win the fight—I also can't deny that it is a hell of a coincidence that I woke up covered in blood the morning after Cole lost a lot of blood in an attack. Oh, and since it happened my first night back, that only ups the coincidence factor.

For me to try to believe that I had nothing to do with what happened to Cole—when even Macy says things like this don't happen at Katmere Academy—involves telling myself a lie of massive proportions.

And I'm a terrible liar.

"We need to call your dad," I whisper. "We need to tell him everything."

Macy hesitates, then says on a breath, "I know." She makes no move to call her dad or anyone else, though. "But what are we going to say to him? This is serious, Grace."

"I know it is! That's why we have to tell him." My mind is racing from one possible scenario to another as I pace the room.

"You can't beat an alpha werewolf," Macy says. "That's why this doesn't make any sense."

"I know it doesn't. Why would I hurt Cole in the first place? And if I did, why can't I remember anything?" I walk to the sink. Evidence or no evidence, now that I know for sure that this isn't my blood, I can't stand having it on me for one more second.

"Okay, so let's be logical about this," Macy says, coming up behind me cautiously. "What *do* you remember about last night? Do you even remember leaving the room?"

"Yeah, of course," I answer as I douse myself in soap and water. "I couldn't sleep, so I left the room around two."

I glance in the mirror and realize that there are a couple of drops of blood on my cheek as well. And that's when I almost lose it. That's when I almost forget about trying to be calm and am tempted to just scream my goddamn head off.

But screaming will only draw attention to the mess I'm in,

attention neither Macy, nor I, is currently equipped to deal with. So I force myself to swallow down my horror as I scrub my face over and over. I have this sick feeling I'm never going to feel clean again.

I continue rinsing the rest of my body as I tell an impatient Macy about my trip down through the tunnels to the art cottage.

"But I swear, Mace, the last thing I remember is gathering up paint to work on my project. I was in the art supply closet, and I had a really strong vision of what I wanted to do on my canvas, so I picked up gray and green and blue paint and then went into the art room and started painting, for what felt like hours."

An idea suddenly comes to me.

"Wait a minute." I turn to Macy as I try to puzzle this out. "Did Jaxon say *where* Cole was attacked?" If this happened because he saw me go into the art room and came after me, then maybe it wasn't the cold-blooded attack it looks like.

Maybe it really *was* self-defense.

Please, please let it have been self-defense.

Then again, how on earth could I actually defend myself against a werewolf? Or end up without a scratch, for that matter? My only power right now is the ability to turn to stone, and though I can see that as a benefit when actually being attacked—as long as my attacker doesn't also have a sledgehammer—I have no idea how it works in an offensive situation.

Like, how could I possibly have drawn this much blood from anyone while doing my best impersonation of a garden gnome?

"He didn't say." Macy hands me my phone. "Maybe you should ask him."

"I'll ask him when I see him." I shudder as I reach for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. "I have to go talk to your dad anyway. But first I need a shower."

Macy looks grim even as she nods. "Okay, you shower and I'll brush my teeth. Then we'll go see my dad together."

"You don't have to do that," I tell her, though I'll admit that I

really, really don't want to face this alone.

She rolls her eyes. "What's that old saying? One for all and all for one?" She plants her hands on her hips. "You're not going down to my father's office and confessing to whatever the hell this is without me."

I start to argue, but she shoots me a death glare so intense that I end up just snapping my mouth shut. Macy may be the most easygoing person I've ever met, but she definitely has a spine made of steel under all that fun exterior.

Macy is still getting ready when I finish my shower, so I grab the bloody clothes off the floor and shove them in an empty bag I have lying around. It's one thing to tell Uncle Finn what I think happened. It's another to parade what looks an awful lot like evidence of my guilt in front of the entire school. I also grab my notebook, just in case, and shove it into my backpack as well before slinging it over my shoulder.

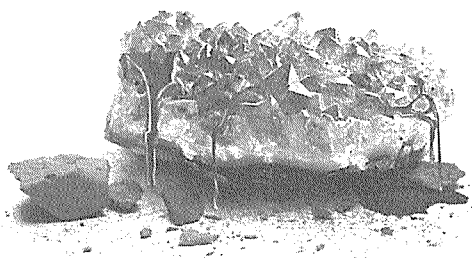
Once we leave the room, I expect Macy to head for the main stairs that deposit us close to her dad's office. But she turns left instead, winding her way through two separate hallways filled with dorm rooms before finally stopping in front of one of my least-favorite paintings in the school—a dramatic rendition of the Salem Witch Trials, which shows all nineteen victims hung at once while flames engulf the village behind them.

Still, the last thing I'm expecting is for Macy to whisper a few words and then wave a hand that makes the painting vanish entirely.

She turns to me, her expression grim again. "Things are going to be in an uproar in the main rooms." Then she does the unexpected. She smiles. "So let's take a shortcut."

Seconds later, a door appears out of nowhere.

Karma's a Witch's Cousin



Unlike the other doors at Katmere, this one is bright yellow and has rainbow stickers all over it—which says everything it needs to about who has claimed ownership of it.

Macy puts her hand on the door and whispers something that sounds like “locks” and “doors” in an almost melodic cadence. And then the door opens.

“Come on,” she entreats, beckoning urgently with her hand as the door swings farther inward. “Before anyone sees.”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice. I follow her through the door, and I don’t even squeak as it shuts itself behind us with a quiet *swish*.

Of course, once the door closes, we’re standing in total darkness, which freaks me out for a whole bunch of other reasons. With my heart beating unsteadily, I fumble for my phone to turn on my flashlight app.

But Macy is on it, and before I can so much as get the cell out of my pocket, she murmurs something about “light” and “life,” and a line of candles along the left side of the passage flares to life.

It’s the coolest thing ever, and the more of Macy’s powers I see, the more impressed I get. But as my eyes adjust to the soft light and I finally see our surroundings, I can’t help but grin.

Because *of course* Macy’s secret passage is nothing like every

other secret passage in the history of castles and secret passages and scary books. It's not musty, it's not overly narrow, and it's definitely *not* creepy. In fact, the whole thing is pretty much the antithesis of creepy. And also, it's totally kick-ass.

Just like the dungeons downstairs, the walls here are made of large and craggy black stones. But randomly placed amid the rocks are beautiful crystals and jewels in all the shades of the rainbow and then some. Polished pink quartz glitters next to sky-blue aquamarines, while a large citrine glints just above a gorgeous rectangular moonstone.

And those aren't the only gems. As far as the eye can see, the passage is lined with them. Emeralds and opals and sunstones and tourmalines... The list goes on and on. And so does the secret passageway.

Who makes a hidden corridor like this? I wonder as we start down the hall. *Filled with all these jewels and crystals that will never see the light of day?* I remember that dragons are known for their love of treasure, but this takes it to a whole new level.

There are stickers here, too, just like in the library. Big ones, small ones, colorful ones, black-and-white ones, and for the first time, I wonder if Macy is the one responsible for the decorations in the library that I liked so much. Or if she and the librarian, Amka, just happen to have the same aesthetic.

On a different day—if I'm not kicked out of Katmere and thrown in some paranormal prison somewhere for attempted murder—I want to come back and read every single one of these stickers.

But for now, I settle for reading the few that are right at face level as we continue along the shadowy passageway.

Why, yes, I can drive a stick, with a picture of a witch's hat and broom.

Karma's a witch, with a crystal ball in the background.

And my personal favorite, *100% that witch*, surrounded by a bed of flowers and sage.

I can't help laughing at that last one, and Macy shoots me a grin as she reaches over and squeezes my hand. "It's going to be okay, Grace," she tells me as we go around a curve. "My dad will figure out what happened."

"I hope so," I tell her, because being a gargoyle is one thing. Being a violent monster who blacks out and then tries to murder people in the bloodiest way possible is something else entirely.

For the first time, I really wonder if Hudson is actually *dead*. More, I start to wonder if maybe I killed him. Everyone seems so sure that I wouldn't have returned to Katmere if I thought Hudson was still a threat, so I've been operating under the assumption that either I left him locked up in some between space, unable to get out, or he figured a way to get free and I came back to help find him.

But if I can half drain an alpha werewolf of blood without having a clue I've done it—although I still have absolutely no idea how that could be possible—what makes me think I didn't do the same to the guy who tried to murder my mate?

Is that why I have no memory of the last four months? Because being a murderer was so traumatic to me that my mind blocked it out? And now it's blocking it out again?

Macy steers me down another long corridor and then a long set of narrow but winding stairs, then whispers, "We're almost there."

Fantastic.

"Almost there" means it's time to face the consequences of what happened to Cole.

"Almost there" means it's time to find out if I really have become the monster I'm afraid I have.

"Almost there" means things are about to get really real and really scary, really fast.

"Okay," Macy says as we finally stop in front of a door painted in rainbow stripes. Big surprise. "You ready?"

"No. Not even a little bit," I answer with a shake of my hand.

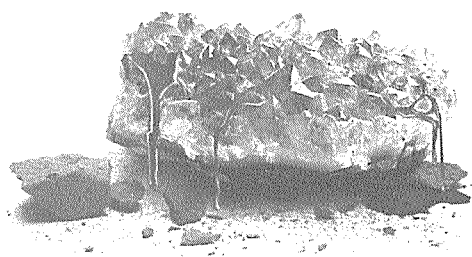
"I know." She hugs me tight for just a few seconds before pulling

away. “But suck it up, buttercup. It’s time to figure out what the actual hell is going on.”

She grabs the door handle and gives me her best attempt at a smile. “I mean, how bad could it possibly be?”

I don’t have an answer for her, and that’s probably good, because the next thing I know, she’s throwing the door open—and I’m staring directly at Jaxon and Uncle Finn.

21



Keep Your Enemies Close, Unless They Bleed a Lot

Jaxon turns to me and frowns. “What are you doing here, Grace? I told you where I was so you wouldn’t worry. I’ve got this.”

“No, you don’t.” I shake my head and try to figure out how to explain how I woke up this morning.

“Sure I do.” For the first time, he looks uncertain. “I didn’t have anything to do with Cole, and Foster knows it.”

“I know you didn’t hurt Cole.” I take a deep breath. “I know you didn’t, because I’m pretty sure I did.”

For long seconds, neither Jaxon nor my uncle says anything. They just kind of stare at me like they’re replaying my words in their heads over and over again, trying to make sense of them. But the longer they’re silent, the more confused they look—and the tenser I get.

Which is why, in the end, I don’t wait for them to say anything. Instead I pour out the whole story, starting with the trip to the art cottage and ending with my blood-soaked clothes, which I pull out of my bag and hand to Uncle Finn.

He doesn’t look excited about taking them, but then, who would? Especially when I just dumped a problem of massive proportions right onto his sturdy wooden desk.

“Are you okay?” Jaxon asks the second I finally stop talking. “You’re sure he didn’t manage to hurt you somehow? You’re sure

he didn't bite you?"

I freeze at the urgency in his tone. "Why? What happens if he bites me? I don't turn into a werewolf, do I?" Because that would just make the clusterfuck that's become my life complete.

A gargoyle werewolf? Or a werewolf gargoyle? Weregoyle? *Garwolf*? I *do* not want to be a garwolf.

Then again, who cares what the proper term is? I shake my head to clear it. I just know that I really, really, really don't want to turn into one.

"No," Uncle Finn interjects in a voice meant to talk me off whatever ledge I'm dangling on—which, okay. Fair enough. "It doesn't work like that. You aren't going to turn into a werewolf or anything else."

"So how does it work? And while we're at it, how can I have possibly beaten up Cole and taken it? It doesn't make any sense. Why don't I remember it? How could I have just gone to bed covered in blood and not even noticed?"

Uncle Finn just sighs and runs a hand through his sandy-brown hair. "I don't know."

I give my uncle a disbelieving look. "You're the headmaster of a school filled with paranormals. How can 'I don't know' be the best answer you've got?"

"Because I've never seen anything like this before. And by the way, the whole gargoyle thing is as new to the rest of us as it is to you. We've been learning while you were gone, of course, but there's still a lot we don't know."

"Obviously." I don't mean to sound snarky; I really don't. I know he just wants to help. But what am I supposed to do here? I can't just go around assaulting people. The whole I-don't-remember thing is going to get old fast. God knows it's already old for me.

Macy steps between us. "So what do we do, Dad? How do we stop this from happening again?"

I wrap my arms around my waist and hold on tight. "You're not going to call the police, are you? I didn't mean to hurt him. Honestly,

I still can't figure out how I *did* hurt him. He's—"

"No one's calling the police, Grace," Jaxon tells me firmly. "That's not how we handle things here. And even if we did, you can't be held responsible for something you did when you weren't aware. Right, Foster?"

"Of course. I mean, we're going to have to watch you, make sure this doesn't happen again. You can't go around assaulting other students."

"Even if they deserve it," Macy interjects. "I know it's wrong, but after everything Cole did to you last semester, I'm having a hard time feeling sympathy for the guy."

Jaxon snorts. "I should have killed him when I had the shot. Then this never would have happened."

"No, you shouldn't have," I scold him. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"Horrible," Macy agrees, "but also a little bit true."

I shoot her a what-the-hell look, but she just kind of shrugs, as if to say, *What did you expect?*

With no help from her or Jaxon, I turn to my uncle. "How is Cole, anyway? Is he going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine. He got a couple of blood transfusions this morning and will probably spend the rest of the day in the infirmary resting, but he'll be fine tomorrow. Good thing about paranormals? We bounce back quickly, especially with a little help from our healers."

"Oh, thank God." I slump against Jaxon as relief sweeps through me.

Defending myself against Lia when she was trying to kill me was one thing. Deliberately going out of my way to try to hurt Cole for no reason is something else entirely. I'm pretty sure Cole is going to think so, too.

"Has he said anything?" I ask after I give myself a chance to wallow in the relief that I didn't do any permanent damage. "I mean, he has to know that I'm the one who attacked him, right?"

"His story is he doesn't know who attacked him," my uncle answers. "Which may or may not be true."

"It's a bunch of bullshit," Jaxon says flatly.

"We don't know that," Uncle Finn admonishes. "And if he doesn't know it was Grace who attacked him, I'm not about to spread the word. At least not until we figure out what's happening to her."

"He knows," Jaxon says. "He just doesn't want to say, because then he'd have to admit to the whole school that he got beaten up by a girl."

"Hey!" I give Jaxon a grumpy face.

"His thinking, not mine," Jaxon clarifies, dropping a kiss on the top of my head. "I saw what you did to Lia—and Hudson. No way would I want to mess with you. But Cole doesn't think like that. He can't.

"Because if the alpha werewolf admits to getting the crap kicked out of him by *anyone* while he was conscious, then he might as well hang it up. He'll spend the next month fighting off every werewolf in the pack who thinks they have a shot at alpha status." Jaxon glances at my uncle. "Right, Foster?"

Uncle Finn nods reluctantly. "Pretty much, yeah. After what happened with Jaxon in November...he has to be very careful how he plays this."

"Which means you've got to be careful, too, Grace." Macy speaks up for the first time in several minutes. "Because if he knows you're the one who did this...the one who has threatened everything he's been working for, he's going to come after you. He won't do it blatantly, because Jaxon would gut him, but he will find a way. That's who he is."

"A coward." Jaxon sneers.

Uncle Finn holds my gaze. "But that only makes him more dangerous, Grace. Because he's not me. He's sly and crafty, and he knows how to bide his time. I would talk to him, but if I do that, he'll know that you must have told me what happened. And then he'll be wondering who else knows. And how long it will be before everything blows up in his face."

“You really think he’ll try something?” I ask, my gaze darting between Jaxon and my uncle.

“Not if he’s half as bright as Foster’s giving him credit for,” Jaxon tells me. But the look in his eyes says something different.

“Oh, he’ll definitely try something,” Uncle Finn tells me. “The only question is when.”

I don’t know what to say to that, don’t even know what I’m supposed to feel. Except tired. So tired.

I barely made it through the last homicidal maniac who was gunning for me, and now, here comes another. I mean, yeah, I obviously did something to provoke this one, but that doesn’t make any sense to me, either. Why would my gargoyle try to murder Cole when I have no reason to do so? I mean, I’ve let what happened last semester go. Or at least I thought I had. This whole thing is scary as hell.

When is this new life of mine going to feel normal? When is it going to feel less like the Hunger Games and more like high school? My wrist starts hurting, and I reach down to rub it, only to realize I’m rubbing the scars from Lia’s bindings. And that Jaxon, Macy, and my uncle can see exactly what I’m doing.

I drop my hand, but it’s too late. Jaxon wraps his arms around me from behind and rests his hands on mine, his thumb gently stroking my wrist.

“He’s already proven he’s willing to kill to get his way,” Macy says after an awkward pause that makes me feel even worse. “And that was before his reputation was on the line. Now that he stands to lose the only thing that matters to him? Yeah, he’ll try something. We just have to be ready for it.”

“We *will* be ready for it,” Jaxon tells me, his midnight-sky eyes never leaving mine. “If he actually comes after you, I’ll—”

“Let me handle it,” my uncle interrupts. “I gave him another chance after everything that happened with you because of extenuating circumstances. But if he tries anything else, he’s gone.”

“What about me?” I finally ask my uncle when I can actually think past the throbbing in my head.

“What about you?” he answers.

“I’m the one who caused this problem. I’m the one who went after Cole for no rhyme or reason that I can figure out. You said he’ll be expelled if he comes after me. But what about what I did? What’s going to happen to me?”

22

Family Is My
Favorite F-Word

“Nothing,” Jaxon grinds out. “Nothing is going to happen to you. This isn’t your fault.”

“We don’t know that,” I answer him, pulling out of his arms. “We don’t have a clue why I attacked Cole.”

“You’re right, we don’t,” Uncle Finn says. “And nobody is doing anything until we figure out what’s going on with you.”

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes reassuringly. “I’m not in the habit of kicking students out who are struggling with their powers, Grace. Or who make bad choices with their power for the right reasons. That’s why Flint is still here, even after everything that happened last semester. Jaxon, too. And it’s also why Katmere has the best healers around. So that when mistakes happen, we can fix them.”

“We don’t know this was a mistake—”

“Did you want to hurt Cole when you left your dorm room?”

“No.”

“Did you make a plan to hurt or kill him during the time you were gone?”

“Of course not.” I pause, rethink it. “I mean, I certainly don’t *remember* doing something like that.”

“Okay, then. I’m going to operate under the assumption that what

happened with Cole last night was some kind of slipup with your new powers. And we're going to treat it as such. I already called a couple of the gargoyle experts who consulted about your case earlier, hoping they could give me some advice about your missing memories. But now that this is going on, I'll see if I can talk one of them into coming to Katmere this week to work with you." He gives me a reassuring smile. "I promise you, we'll get to the bottom of this, Grace."

My eyes burn a little at this new proof that Uncle Finn has had my back all along, that he's been moving so many pieces around in the background, trying to figure out the best way to help me.

It's not quite like having my parents back—nothing will ever feel like that again. But it's something good in the middle of all this mess. And it's a lot better than the lost and lonely feeling I had when I first got to Katmere four and a half months ago.

"Thank you," I murmur when I can finally squeeze the words past the giant lump in my throat. "All of you. I don't know what I would do without you."

"Yeah, well, that's a good thing, considering you're stuck with us," Macy says, moving in for a hug just as the chimes ring, signaling the first class of the day.

"I'll take you," I answer, hugging her back.

"All right, all right," Uncle Finn says, and I could be mistaken, but I'm pretty sure he sounds like his throat is a little tight, too. "Get to class. And for the love of Salem, all of you try to stay out of trouble."

"Where's the fun in that?" Jaxon murmurs in my ear as he walks me through the door into the hall. We're going out the normal exit this time, not the secret passage.

"The fun is I don't wake up covered in werewolf blood ever again," I answer him and shudder. "Which is pretty much a win-win for everyone, don't you think?"

"I think you forget that you're talking to a vampire," he teases, and his mouth is still close enough to my ear to cause all kinds of shivers in all kinds of places. I lean in to him, and for a beat, we both

just enjoy the way it feels to rest against each other, the hardness of his body cradled by the softness of mine.

But then he shifts a little, leaning down as if to kiss me, and I freeze up all over again. Again I try to hide it, but Jaxon notices—of course he does. Not for the first time, I wonder how long it's going to take my gargoyle side to accept a vampire for a mate. Or why my gargoyle side even has an issue with vampires in the first place.

I don't try to make an excuse this time. Instead, I just smile sadly at him and mouth, *I'm sorry*. He doesn't answer, just shakes his head in a "don't worry about it" kind of way. I can see that it hurts him, though, even as he shifts to drop a kiss on my forehead.

"Can I walk you to class?" he asks as he pulls back.

"Of course." I wrap an arm around his waist and squeeze him extra tight before looking around for Macy's hot-pink hair as we fold into the crowds. I don't want her to feel left out.

But, per usual, she's already up ahead of us, talking animatedly to Gwen and another one of the witches who are making their way to class.

As we start to walk, I lean away again, grab hold of Jaxon's hand, and thread our fingers together. I may not be able to kiss him right now, but that doesn't mean I don't love him. And it doesn't mean I don't want to be with him any way that I can.

Jaxon doesn't say anything, but he doesn't object, either. And when I look up at him, I realize that the small smile he's got on his face has an extremely goofy tint to it. Because of me.

I'm the girl who turns badass vampire prince Jaxon Vega goofy.

Not going to lie, it feels good.

"So where am I walking you?" Jaxon asks as we finally reach the main hallway.

"I don't know. They switched my science class. I went from basic Chem to the Physics of Flight, but I don't know why."

"Really? You don't know why?" Jaxon asks, brow raised, a teasing glint in his eyes.

"No." I shrug. "Do you?"

"I mean, I can't say for sure, but I'm guessing it has something to do with the big, beautiful wings your alter ego carries around."

"My alter— Ooooooh." That has my eyes going wide. "You mean the Physics of Flight is about actually being able to fly?"

"Yeah." He looks at me incredulously. "What did you think it was about?"

"I don't know. Airplanes, I guess. That's why I was so confused."

"No, Grace. At Katmere, the class about flying is *actually* about flying."

"I just— That's— I mean..." In the end, I just shake my head. I mean, what else is there to say about that? Except: "Flight class. They think I should be in flight class." What on earth am I supposed to do with that?

"Well, wings are pretty much a prerequisite for flying," Jaxon teases as we turn down another hallway. "And so is figuring out how to use them."

"Oh yeah?" It's my turn to raise a brow at him. "Because I'm pretty sure *you* can fly without them."

He laughs. "Oh, hey! I've got a new joke for you."

"A new joke?" My brows hit my hairline as a grin splits my face. "Awesome. Lay it on me."

The look he gives me is suddenly steaming hot, and it says *very clearly* that there's a whole lot he wants to lay on me, and very little of it has to do with the cheesy jokes I love.

There's a part of me that wants to look away, that feels uncomfortable with the sudden intimacy of the moment. But that isn't fair to him—isn't fair to either of us, really—so I keep my gaze steady on his, even as heat and uncertainty surge in equal parts through my body.

For a moment, just a moment, I think Jaxon is going to follow up on the feelings I don't even try to hide, his midnight eyes turning to a deep, unrelenting black as his jaw goes tight.

But then the moment passes, and I can see him make the choice

to let the tension, and everything that comes with it, slip away.

I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed. Probably a little bit of both. But when Jaxon takes a very deliberate step back, physically and emotionally, it seems only fair to go with it.

"So." He grins down at me. "What sound does a gargoyle make when he sneezes?"

"A gargoyle joke? Seriously?" I roll my eyes at him.

He laughs. "What, too soon?"

He looks so pleased with himself that I can't deny him anything. "No, go ahead."

"What does a gargoyle say when he sneezes?"

I eye him warily. "I'm afraid to ask."

"Stat-chool!"

"Oh my God. That's awful."

He grins. "I know, right? Want to hear another one?"

"I don't know," I answer, skepticism ripe in my voice. "Do I?"

"You do." He squeezes my hand. "Why don't gargoyles go out during the day?"

"I don't want to know." I brace for his answer.

"Because they're too stoned."

"Oh my God!" I make a face at him. "That one was bad."

"It *was* awful," he agrees.

"And you obviously loved it. I've created a monster," I tease, shaking my head in mock horror as I lean into him.

But Jaxon's eyes are shadowed now, the laughter slipping away as easily as it came.

"No." Jaxon watches me with an intensity that shakes me to my very bones. "I've always been a monster, Grace. You're the one who's made me human."

My stomach sinks like a stone.

Because while Jaxon is definitely becoming more human...I'm deathly afraid that I'm turning into the real monster at Katmere Academy.

Saturday Morning Cartoons Never Prepared Me for This



Jaxon's words stay with me all day, melting me whenever I think about them. About him. Making me more determined than ever to find my way back to him, fully.

With that thought in mind, I decide to skip lunch—both Jaxon and Macy have study-group plans anyway—and head straight for the library, where I'll have a couple of hours of uninterrupted time to research gargoyles.

To research myself.

Which I really, really need to do, considering my knowledge on the subject is incredibly limited. And when I googled them last night, all I got was an architecture lesson when what I really need to know is why I am apparently prone to bloody attacks and amnesia.

I should probably set up an appointment with Mr. Damasen, see what information he can give me on gargoyles that doesn't involve pages upon pages about how they're really good waterspouts and gutters.

I mean, I didn't know that much about vampires, dragons, or witches when I got here, but I had a basic understanding of what they were and how things worked for them—though Jaxon, Macy, and Flint have still blown my mind on several occasions.

But gargoyles? I've got almost nothing. Except that they don't

seem to like vampires much.

In fact, the extent of my knowledge about *myself* pretty much comes from studying the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in art class and from what I can remember of the *Gargoyles* TV show reruns I watched when I was little. My mom always got a little agitated when she found me watching that show... Now I can't help but wonder if it's because she and my dad knew what was coming.

It's a horrible thought—the idea that my parents deliberately kept who I really am from me my whole life—so I shove it to the back of my head and force myself not to think about it. Because learning that I'm a gargoyle is bad enough. Learning that my parents didn't care enough to prepare me for this? That's unforgivable.

Or it would be if they were alive. Now that they're dead...I don't know. Something else to go in my growing “Shit I Don't Have Time for Today” folder. Because dwelling on it now definitely isn't going to help me.

Instead, I paste a huge smile on my face—a smile that I'm far from feeling right now—and walk straight up to the circulation desk in the center of the library.

Amka is there, thankfully, and she smiles at me just as widely—hers looks genuine, though, which is nice. “Grace! It's so good to have you back.” She reaches across the desk and squeezes my hand. “How are you?”

I start to give her a trite answer—*I'm good, thanks*—but the warmth and concern in her eyes get to me, even though I don't want them to. So instead of lying, I just kind of shrug and say, “I'm here.” Which isn't exactly what I'm feeling, but it's close enough to get the point across.

Her smile turns sympathetic. “Yeah, you are. And I'm really glad about that.”

And there she goes again, putting things in perspective for me really quickly. “Yeah. Me too.” My manners kick in a little belatedly. “How are you?”

"I'm doing well. Just getting the library in shape for the Ludares tournament. Teams like to meet in here to strategize before the big day."

"What's Ludares?" I ask. "And is that what that's for?" I point to the table now taking up space in the center of the library. I didn't get a good look at it on my way in, but I plan on checking it out later, when I need a research break. From what I saw, it's filled with all kinds of interesting and magical objects.

"Originally, it was designed as a Trial to compete for spots on the Circle—the governing body for supernaturals—but...since no one on it has died in a thousand years, there haven't been any new openings to compete for. Which means for now, it's just a sporting event.

"Of course, the version of Ludares that's the actual Test is a lot more dangerous than what we play now—and the odds are way stacked against the challenger's success. Now it's more for fun and to promote interspecies relations, since the teams are made up of all four of Katmere's factions." Her eyes twinkle. "It's the highlight of every school year."

"So how do you play?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. It's something you have to be a part of to understand."

"That's so cool. I can't wait to see it."

"See it?" Amka laughs. "You should compete in it."

"Me?" I'm aghast. "No way can I compete against a bunch of vampires and dragons. I mean, what am I going to do? Turn to stone? I'm pretty sure that's not much help in a competition."

"Don't be so negative. Gargoyles can do a lot more than turn to stone, Grace."

"They can?" Excitement bubbles up in my voice. "Like what?"

"You'll figure it out soon enough."

I'm a little annoyed—that's not much of an answer—and my shoulders sag, but then she turns around and points to one of the heavy wooden tables in the corner of the library. There are about three dozen

books piled into several haphazard stacks, plus a laptop sitting right in front of a comfortable-looking armchair in a patchwork of colors.

“I took the liberty of pulling every book we have about gargoyles. The piles on either side of the laptop are the ones I think you should start with—they approach things pretty broadly and give a good overview. The back piles are more nitty-gritty research-oriented stuff and will answer more specific questions you might have as you learn more.

“And the laptop is already signed in to the top three magical databases in the world. If you have any questions about how to use them to research, let me know. But to be honest, they’re pretty self-explanatory. I think you’ll do fine.”

Despite not being a crier—I’ve never been a crier—I can feel tears burning the back of my throat for, like, the third time today. I hate it, absolutely despise it, but I can’t seem to help it. I feel so topsy-turvy, and realizing so many people have my back...it’s just a little overwhelming.

Or a lot overwhelming. I haven’t decided yet.

“Thank you,” I tell her when my throat finally relaxes enough for me to speak. “I...I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, Grace. Anytime.” She smiles. “We bibliophiles need to stick together.”

I grin back. “Yeah, we do.”

“Good.” She reaches behind her to the small, stickered refrigerator she keeps next to her workspace and pulls out a can of lemon La Croix and a Dr Pepper and hands them to me. “Researching is thirsty work.”

“Oh, wow.” I take the cans from her with suddenly shaky hands. “Thank you so much. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. Just get to work,” she says with a wink.

“Yes, ma’am.” I give her one last smile and then head toward the table in the corner.

My fingers are itching to dive in to the books—and so is the rest of me, to be honest—but I take a few minutes to get situated before

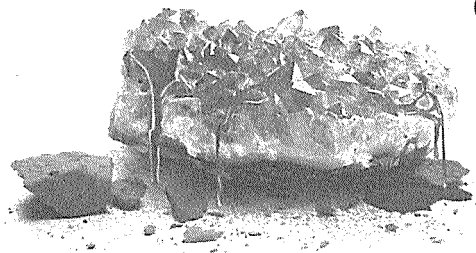
I start. I pull out the notebook I've designated just for my research and a handful of my favorite pens.

I put in my earbuds and get my favorite playlist going before pulling out the pack of M&M's I bought at the vending machine in the student lounge on my way here. Then, and only then, do I settle into what very well might be the most comfortable chair in existence... and finally reach for a book.

I just hope it has some of the answers I need. And I wouldn't mind a good memory retrieval spell, too...

24

Go Smudge Yourself



“G^{ra}-ace. Come on, time to wake up.” A familiar voice penetrates the hazy fog of sleep that surrounds me. “Come on, Grace. You need to get up.” Someone taps my shoulder.

I swipe a hand across my face. Then roll over and curl up into a ball.

“I don’t know what to do.” This time I’m conscious enough to identify the voice as Macy’s, even though I have no idea who she’s talking to or even what she’s talking about. Nor do I care.

I’m so tired, all I want to do is sleep.

“Let me try.” This time it’s my uncle Finn who bends over me and says, “Grace, I need you to wake up for me, okay? Open your eyes. Come on. Right now.”

I ignore him, curling into an even tighter ball, and when he runs a comforting hand over the top of my head, I moan and try to pull my pillow over my face. But there’s no pillow under my head and no covers for me to yank up and hide beneath.

I’m almost conscious enough to recognize this as strange—almost—and when someone shakes my shoulder more forcefully this time, I manage to crack my eyes open just enough to see Macy, my uncle, and Amka staring down at me, all with worried looks on their faces.

I don't have a clue what Uncle Finn or Amka is doing in our room, and at the moment, I don't actually care. I just want them to leave so I can go back to sleep.

"There you are, Grace," my uncle says. "There you go. Can you sit up for us? Maybe let us get a good look into those pretty eyes of yours? Come on now, Grace. Come back to us."

"I'm tired," I whine in a voice I'm sure I'll be embarrassed about later. "I just want to—" I break off as pain registers for the first time. My throat is so dry that every word I speak feels like a razor blade scraping against my voice box.

Screw mornings. And screw three-person wake-up calls.

I close my eyes again as sleep continues to beckon, but apparently my uncle has had enough. He starts shaking me gently so that I can't even curl up in peace now. "Come on, Grace." His voice is firmer than it was before, more no-nonsense than I have ever heard it. "You need to snap out of this. Right now."

I sigh heavily, but I finally manage to roll over to face him. "What's the matter?" I rasp, forcing myself to speak, and to swallow, despite the pain. "What do you want?"

I hear a door open and close and then rapid footsteps coming closer. "What's going on? Is she all right? I came as soon as I got Macy's text."

The worry in Jaxon's voice finally manages to do what the coaxing and shaking couldn't. I push myself into a sitting position and this time actually manage to pry my eyes all the way open.

"Can I have some water?" I ask through lips that feel absurdly parched, considering I'm not wandering the Sahara.

"Yeah, of course." Macy grabs something from her backpack and hands it to me—a stainless-steel tumbler with the lid off. I take a long drink. Then go back for two more as my throat finally begins to feel human again.

As does the rest of me.

The cold water has the added benefit of getting my brain going,

and as soon as I've slaked my thirst, I turn to Jaxon with what I'm sure are still sleep-fogged eyes.

"What's going on?" I ask. "Why is everyone in Macy's and my room?"

There's a weird silence as the four of them look at one another, then back at me.

"What?" I ask again.

Macy sighs. "I hate to break it to you, Grace, but this is definitely not our room."

"Whose room is it, then?" I ask, looking around. And that's when panic hits me, because I realize Macy is right. This isn't our room. It isn't Jaxon's room. In fact, I'm pretty positive it isn't even a bedroom, unless the person furnishing it is a huge fan of Scary Dungeons 'R' Us.

"Where are we?" I ask when I can finally find my voice again.

Amka steps in before Jaxon or my family can answer. Squatting down next to me—and for the first time, I realize I'm on the floor—she asks, "Where do you think you are?"

"I don't know." I look around again, this time hoping to find a clue as agitation builds inside me. I'm just beginning to realize that not only do I not know where I am, but I also have absolutely no idea how I got here.

And can I just say, this is seriously getting old?

The last thing I remember is sitting down to work in the library, with a sparkling water and some M&M's. After that...nothing. It's a blank. Again.

"Is someone hurt?" I demand, panic roaring through me. "Did I do it again? Did I attack someone?"

"No, Grace. Everything's fine." Amka puts what I know she means to be a calming hand on my shoulder, but it doesn't work. It just makes me more freaked out, as does the low, soothing tone of her voice.

"Don't do that. Don't try to placate me." I push away from her, leap to my feet...and turn to Jaxon. "Please, please don't lie to me. Did I hurt someone? Did I—"

“No!” He says it much more vehemently, voice adamant and eyes steady as he stares into mine. “You didn’t hurt anyone, I swear. You’re the one we’re worried about right now.”

“Why? What happened?” I believe Jaxon, I do, but the memory of waking up covered in blood this morning is so strong that I can’t help looking down at my hands, my clothes, just to make sure. Just to feel safe.

I’m not bloody, thank God. But the sleeve of my blazer is ripped all to hell. Because that’s not terrifying at all, considering it’s just now reaching a high of freezing outside.

Suddenly, the concern on everyone’s faces makes a lot more sense. They aren’t worried that I hurt someone. This time, they’re worried that I’m the one who’s gotten hurt.

I swallow the fear exploding inside me like a hand grenade and try to breathe. I *am* going to figure this out. It’s bad enough that I lost four months to this mess. No way am I going to just accept that I’ve brought it back with me. No way am I going to let this become my new normal.

“Where am I?” I ask for a second time, because I am absolutely positive I’ve never been in a room with a crystal ball before *ever*, let alone at Katmere Academy. And I’ve certainly never been in a room with a candle collection that rivals Bath & Body Works—if Bath & Body Works was into carved-up ritual candles and enough incense to cover Alaska twice over.

“You’re in the casting tower,” Macy tells me.

“*The casting tower?*” I didn’t even know there was such a thing.

“It’s on the opposite side of the castle from my room,” Jaxon adds in what I assume is an attempt to help me get my bearings.

“Oh, right. The smaller tower on the gazebo side.” I shove a hand—one that I’m working overtime to keep steady—through my curls. “I guess I just always assumed it was somebody else’s dorm room.”

“Nope.” Macy shoots me a grin that almost touches her eyes.

“Your boyfriend is the only one who rates a tower. This one belongs

to *all* the witches.”

Of course it belongs to the witches. If it belonged to anyone else, I’d be really concerned. Especially since I just looked down and realized that I am standing dead center in the middle of a giant pentagram.

And not just any giant pentagram. The giant pentagram that makes up the center of an even more giant casting circle...

Oh, hell no. Lia cured me of *ever* wanting to be anywhere close to the middle of another spell. Ever.

I take several big steps backward, not because I want to get away from Jaxon or Macy or the others but because I am getting the hell out of this circle. Now.

Call it an overabundance of caution, call it PTSD, call it whatever the hell you want; I don’t care. No way am I spending another second in a circle surrounded by red and black candles.

No, thank you.

The rest of them follow me, because of course they do. Each of them takes a step forward for each step I take back. My uncle and Amka look really concerned, and Macy looks curious. But Jaxon... Jaxon’s got a small, rueful smile on his face that tells me he knows exactly what’s got me so freaked out. Then again, he’s the only one here who was down in that tunnel with me.

With everything that happened to him that day, too, I’m surprised he hasn’t run screaming from this room. God knows I’m considering it.

“Grace?” Macy asks as I continue to step backward. “Where are you going?”

“Out of, ummm...” I break off in frustration as I realize I’m *still* in the circle. “How big is this thing anyway?”

“It takes up most of the room,” Uncle Finn answers, looking even more confused. “We have a lot of witches who need to fit around the circle. Why?”

But Macy seems to have finally clued in. “Oh, sweetie, the circle isn’t cast. Nothing can hurt you right now. And in here we do magic

that does no harm anyway. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Of course there isn't. I know that. I'm still just going to..." I use my thumb to point backward over my shoulder.

"Would it make you feel better if we left this room completely?" Amka asks.

I focus on her as relief sweeps through me. "So much, I can't even tell you."

"Okay, then let's go." Just that easily, Uncle Finn starts herding everyone toward the door. "There's something you need to see in the library anyway."

"In the library?" Now I'm even more confused. "You mean the gargoyle books Amka got out for me? I saw them earlier, and I'm planning on working my way through them."

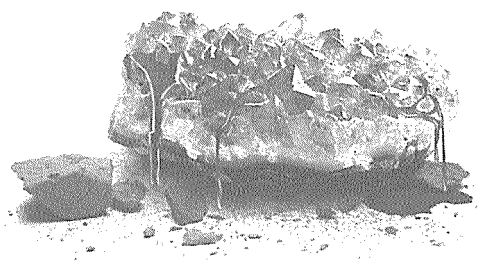
"No. Something else. We'll talk about it when we get there."

That doesn't sound ominous at all. I'm about to press for details, but my uncle looks grim. Really grim, and it scares me more than I want to admit.

Before Katmere, I never imagined I'd be afraid of walking into a library. Then again, before Katmere, I never imagined a lot of things.

25

And the Blackouts Just Keep on Coming



As soon as we get outside the casting room, Jaxon stops me with a light hand on my wrist.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, more than willing to take as long as possible to get to what I’m rapidly beginning to think of as the library of doom. “Do you need something?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure you do.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. He just tilts his head to the side—and listens like he’s waiting for something. A minute later, Mekhi is standing before me. And holding a large black jacket that I recognize as Jaxon’s.

He grins at me and bows, presenting the jacket as if to royalty. “My lady.”

For the first time since I woke up in a giant magical circle, everything seems like it might be okay. Mekhi isn’t treating me weirdly. He’s grinning at me like he always does. And I can’t help but grin back.

I give a mock curtsy and take the jacket from his hands. “My liege.”

“I’m going to want all the details later, but I’ve got to book it to my next class right now. See ya, Grace!” And with that, he vanishes. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to how fast vampires can move.

“You didn’t have to ask Mekhi to do that.” I take off my ripped-up blazer and don Jaxon’s jacket, inhaling his scent as I do.

"I know." He watches me carefully. "I like taking care of you."

My already battered heart aches a little more at his words and the look in his eyes. I just wish I knew how to respond. There's a part of me, a big part, that wants to lean in to him and press my lips to his. But I also know my gargoyle won't let me yet, which is super frustrating on pretty much all the levels.

I mean, why let me kiss him that first time when I just got back to school, only to make sure I never let him near me like that again? It bothers me, and I can only imagine that it bothers Jaxon, too, even though he doesn't say anything. In the end, I do the only thing I can do. I hold his gaze, hoping he can see in my eyes just how much his caring means to me.

"Come on, let's go," Jaxon finally says, and there is a gruffness to his voice that isn't usually there. He holds a hand out to me.

I take it, and the two of us head down the winding steps together.

"Do you know what Uncle Finn wants to show me in the library?" I ask as we make it to the correct floor.

"No." He shakes his head. "I got a frantic text from Macy telling me that you were missing, so the guys and I started looking, along with Finn and her. They texted us that they'd found you in the tower, but that's all I know."

"I don't understand," I tell him, a shiver running down my spine as we finally make it to the hallway the library is on. "I went to the library to research gargoyles around noon, but I don't remember doing any research. I don't remember anything, actually, after I sat down to work."

"It's five o'clock, Grace."

"But I was in the library. Did Amka know when I left?"

"You would think, but I don't know. Like I said, she called your uncle and Macy, not me." There's something in his voice that I can't quite identify, but he doesn't sound impressed.

Apparently, Jaxon feels like he deserves to be notified about things related to me. Which is annoying, because he doesn't actually own

me. And yet, I think about how I would feel if something happened to him... Yeah, pretty sure I would want to be notified, too.

He holds the library door open for me, and then we walk inside, only to find a conspicuously empty open glass case. Whatever item was displayed there is gone, the bed of purple velvet empty in that one spot.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" I ask my uncle. "I don't know what happened. It was fine when I was here earlier."

And if anyone had actually tried to break into it when I was here, I would have seen them. So would Amka. The exhibit is diagonally across from the table she set up for me and directly in front of the circulation desk.

"What *do* you remember from when you were here earlier, Grace?" Amka is the one asking me questions now, my uncle hanging back and following her lead.

"Not a lot, honestly. I remember our conversation and sitting down to work, but that's it. Did something else happen?"

"You don't remember working?"

"No. I remember getting ready to work, but I don't remember opening a book or taking any notes. Did I do that?"

"You took all the notes." She picks up a notebook from her desk and hands it to me.

I flip through it, and she's right. It's more than half full already, with information about gargoyles that I have no recollection of but am now itching to sit down and read.

"I did all this in five hours?" I ask, surprised by how thorough the note-taking is, when usually I hit only the highlights and rely on my really good memory (present situation obviously not included) to fill in the blanks.

"Actually, you did all that in an hour and a half. At one thirty, I closed the library for a few minutes and ran out to my cottage to get some medicine for a sudden headache. You said you were doing well, so I left you working, but when I came back, you were gone. And the Athame of Morrigan had been stolen."

Horror moves through me as all the threads of the story start to come together in one glaring realization. “You think I did this?” I ask. “You think I stole the...” I wave my hand in the air.

“Athame,” Macy fills in. “It’s a double-sided ceremonial blade for witches. This particular one has been in our family for centuries.”

I want to be outraged that they think I could do this. But the truth is, they have every right to suspect me. Especially since I have absolutely no idea what I was doing during the time Amka left the library.

“We don’t think *you* stole it,” Uncle Finn tells me in a voice I recognize as deliberately soothing. “But we do think something is going on inside you that makes you do these things, and that’s what we want to try to figure out so we can help you.”

“Do we really know?” I ask, my voice coming out higher and louder than I want it to. “I mean, are you sure I’m the one who did this?” It’s not even that I doubt them, it’s just that I don’t *want* to believe them. Because then I have to start wondering. What kind of powers does this gargoyle inside me have? And why is it using me to do these terrible things?

Jaxon wraps a supportive arm around my waist, then rests his chin on my shoulder as he whispers in my ear, “It’s okay. We’ve got this.”

I’m glad he thinks so, because right now, it doesn’t feel like I’ve got anything.

“That’s why we wanted you to come here, so we could all rewatch the footage together. See if we can figure out what’s really going on.” My uncle walks behind the circulation desk.

“Nobody blames you, Grace,” Macy says with a reassuring smile. “We know something else is going on.”

My knees get weak at theirs words—there’s *footage*?—and at the grim look on my uncle’s face. Because if they’ve seen the footage already, then they know for sure that I’m the one who stole the athame.

The knowledge hits me like a body blow.

I know it’s naive, but I think I’ve been holding out hope all day.

Hope that there was another explanation for the blood on my clothes this morning. Definite hope that someone else attacked Cole, and now hope that someone else stole the athame.

Because knowing that it's me, knowing that I did all that and have no recollection of it whatsoever, is beyond terrifying. Not just that I can't remember but that I really don't have any control over what I do when I'm like that.

I could actually kill someone, and I would never know.

Panic starts to bubble up in my chest, my breath coming out in shallow puffs. I count to ten...then twenty. My heart is beating so fast, I start to feel light-headed. I don't take my gaze from my uncle as he fiddles with the computer on the circulation desk and then turns the monitor around to face me.

"It's okay," Jaxon says again, even though it's not. Even though it's about as far from okay as it can possibly get. "I promise you, Grace, we'll figure this out."

"I hope so," I answer as we all crowd around Uncle Finn to watch the video footage. "Because how long can this go on before I end up in prison...or worse?"

My stomach sinks as I watch a recording of me on the screen—doing things I don't remember doing.

According to the time at the bottom of the footage, I got up from the table where I was reading and taking notes at exactly one thirty. I went over to Amka and said something to her. She nodded with a strange look on her face, and less than a minute later, she got up. But instead of leaving, like she'd said earlier, she walked over to the glass case housing the athame and several other precious magical items, all of which, it turns out, were under a protection spell, my uncle explains.

And at 1:37, the librarian went ahead and opened the case like it was nothing. Then she walked out of the library and didn't come back.

"What just happened?" I ask, looking from Jaxon to Amka to my uncle and then back again. "Did I use some kind of special gargoyle power?"

Amka shakes her head as the video continues to roll, and I watch as I reach into the case and scoop out the athame, snagging my jacket on the way out. “I have no memory of doing that, of unlocking the case.”

“Hudson,” Jaxon says, voice low and vehement and maybe even a little...scared? Which messes me up in all kinds of ways, because Jaxon is almost never scared.

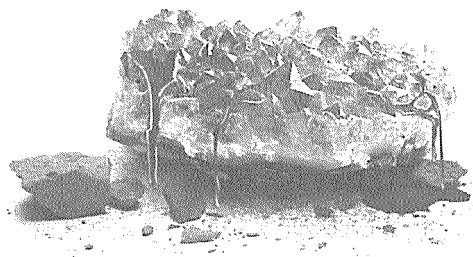
“What?” my uncle Finn demands. “What about Hudson?”

“When we were kids, he used to do that. He has to speak directly to the person, but he can persuade anyone to do anything for him with merely his voice.”

“Do what?” I ask as razor-sharp talons of fear rake through me. “What did Hudson do, Jaxon?”

Jaxon finally manages to pull his haunted gaze from the video. “Use his power of persuasion to get people to do whatever he wanted.”

26



Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law

Jaxon's words hang in the air between us for several seconds, the power and horror of them an actual physical presence that has my body tensing and a chill running over my skin.

"What does that mean?" I finally whisper, the words falling like grenades into the silence between us. "Is Hudson here? Did I bring him back with me? Is he persuading me to do things?"

"He's definitely here," Uncle Finn agrees. "The only question is what we do next."

"Well, where is he, then?" I demand. "Why haven't we seen him?"

I look from my uncle's sad face to Jaxon's enraged one, from Amka's quiet compassion to the distress Macy tries to hide but simply can't, and a weight starts to grow in my stomach. A weight that gets heavier and heavier with every second that passes.

A weight that nearly pulls me under as the truth crashes into me.

"No," I tell them, shaking my head as panic and disgust and horror wrench through me all at the same time. "No, no, no. It can't be."

"Grace, it's okay." Jaxon steps forward, lays a hand on my arm.

"It's *not* okay!" I all but shout at him. "It's the opposite of okay."

"Breathe," my uncle says. "There are things we can do to try to fix this. "

"Try to fix it?" I answer with a laugh that even I can tell borders

on the hysterical. “I have a monster living *inside me*.”

“There are options,” Amka says, her voice deliberately soothing. “There are several options we can try before we start to panic—”

“Not to be rude, Amka, but I think you mean before *you* start to panic. Because I’m already there.”

Panic races through me, and this time I’m pretty sure I’m not going to be able to stop the attack. At this point, I’m pretty sure not even a dump truck full of Xanax would be able to stop it. Not when my head is swimming and my heart is pounding out of my chest.

“Grace, it’s okay.” Macy reaches for me, but I step backward and hold my hand up in the typical gesture for *give me a second*.

Thankfully, everyone does. They give me more than a second, in fact, though I don’t know how much more. Eventually, my now-familiar defense mechanisms slide into place.

I’m nowhere close to being okay—at this point, I can’t even imagine what okay would feel like—but I shove my panic down deep inside me and focus on keeping my mind clear.

I need to be able to think.

I need to figure out what to do.

Scratch that, *we* need to figure out what to do, because as I stare at the four concerned people looking back at me, I realize that just because it feels like I’m alone—more alone even than the day my parents died—I’m not.

Jaxon and Macy and Uncle Finn and even Amka aren’t going to let me do this alone, even if I wanted to. And the truth is, I really, really don’t want to. I wouldn’t even know where to start.

“So,” I manage to say after a few attempts at clearing my throat. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Anything,” Jaxon tells me, and he reaches a hand out, grabs on to mine. It’s only after our palms connect that I realize how cold all this has made me. Jaxon’s palm feels burning hot against my own.

“Can you say it?” I ask.

Jaxon’s grip tightens on my hand. “Say what?” he asks, but the

look on his face tells me he already knows.

“I just need you to say it so I don’t feel like there’s something really wrong with me. Please.”

Jaxon is looking more haunted than I have ever seen him. Normally, I’d be the one to comfort him when he looks like this, but I can’t. I don’t have it in me. Not now. Not yet.

“Jaxon,” I whisper, because I don’t know what else to do. “Please.”

He nods jerkily, his eyes a burning-hot obsidian that sizzles along every inch of my skin as he looks at me.

“The reason we haven’t been able to figure out what happened to Hudson,” he says in a voice that tears like broken glass. “The reason we haven’t been able to find out where you left him, or where he went, is because he’s been here all along.”

I lock my knees in place so I don’t crumble, then wait for him to drop the bombshell that’s been living in my head the last several minutes, the bombshell that I don’t want to hear—don’t want to know—but that I all but begged him to let loose.

“The reason we haven’t been able to figure out where at Katmere Academy Hudson is hiding is because all along, he’s been hiding inside you.”

When the Evil Within Really Needs to be the Evil That's Out, Out, Out



His words—expected and yet a total shock—go off inside me like a bomb. Like a nuclear reactor at the most dangerous stage of meltdown. Because this can't be happening. This just can't be happening.

I can't have Jaxon's evil brother inside me.

I can't have him taking control of me whenever he wants.

I can't have him wiping my memories out of existence.

I just can't.

And yet, apparently, I can. I do.

"It's okay," my uncle tells me. "As soon as I get back to my office, I'm going to make some calls. I'll find someone who knows how to deal with this and get them to Katmere as soon as possible."

"And I'll start doing research," Macy adds. "Like Amka said, there are some spells that might work, so she and I can contact several different covens and see what we can find out. Plus, we'll keep researching. We'll find a way to get Hudson out of your mind. I swear."

Her words reverberate in my head, spinning around and around and around as I try to grapple with this new nightmare. As I try to figure out if I can actually feel Hudson inside me, his oily fingers on my heart and mind.

I try and try and try, but I can't find anything. No thoughts that aren't my own. No feelings that don't belong to me. Nothing out of the ordinary except, of course, the whole body-snatching routine he's doing.

As I'm trying to come to terms with this nightmare, this new and horrible violation, the conversation rages around me. Jaxon, Uncle Finn, Macy, Amka, all throwing their two cents in about how to fix this.

About how to fix me.

Everyone giving their opinion on what, to me, is the most personal problem of my life. The most personal problem anyone could ever have—someone else living inside your skin, taking you over whenever they want, making you do horrible things you would never willingly do.

"What about me?" I ask when I can't stand the discussing/bickering for one second longer.

"I promise we'll fix this," Uncle Finn says. "We will get him out of you."

"That's not what I meant," I tell him. "I meant, what do *I* do? While you four are all trying to figure out how to save me, what can *I* do to save myself?"

That gets their attention, has them eyeing one another as they try to figure out what I mean. Which is just proof that there's a problem, right?

"Grace, honey, there's nothing for you to do right now." My uncle addresses me in the deliberately calm tone of someone who expects the person he's using it on to go hysterical at any moment.

But the hysteria is gone. Not forever, as I'm sure it will be back before this nightmare is over, but for now. And in its place is a determination not to be placated, a determination to never be placed in a situation like this one ever again.

"Well, then I guess we'd better find something for me to do," I tell him. "Because if we're right, if Hudson is actually living inside

me like some kind of parasite, there is no way I'm just going to sit back and wait to see what you guys come up with. Doing that is what's gotten me into every terrible situation I've been in since I got to Alaska."

The words are harsh and, in another situation, another reality, I would never have said them. But in this situation, in *this* reality, they needed to be said.

And the people I'm talking to need to listen to them...and to me. Because there is no way I'm taking a back seat for one more second. No way I'm just going to sit around and let them prevaricate and tell me half-truths and hide things from me in the name of *protection*. Not now. Not anymore.

"Yes, I want to know what I can do to get Hudson out of me," I tell them. "But since that seems like it's going to be a process, I need some stopgap measures to help me out. Like what I can do, right now, to ensure he can't make me hurt anyone else. Not what *you* can do but what *I* can do.

"Because I am not going to just sit here and let him take control of me whenever he wants until all the experts can figure things out. He is never going to use me as a weapon again—not against Cole, not against Amka, and definitely, definitely not against Jaxon."

"Hudson can't use you against me—" Jaxon starts to interrupt, but I cut him off with a hand.

"He already has," I tell him as my brain races through different scenarios and things start to fall into place. "Why do you think I'm so uncomfortable with you right now? Why do you think I back away every time you try to kiss me? Maybe you haven't gotten around to putting that together yet, but it's becoming crystal clear to me."

I can see from the look in Jaxon's eyes that I'm getting through to him, that he's going back over every interaction we've had the last two days and trying to see what was me and what was Hudson. Not that I blame him—I've just done the very same thing...and I really, really don't like what I've found.

“I’m done, Jaxon. I’m done, Uncle Finn. I’m not waking up covered in someone else’s blood ever again. Or in the middle of a casting circle, missing with ripped clothes. And I am not giving a murderer free range over my body or my head for one more second than I have to.”

My chest is tight and my hands are shaking, but my mind is clear, and I know—I *know*—that I’m doing the right thing.

“Either you talk to me and help me figure out what I can do, or I swear, I’m going to walk back to that stack of books over there. I’m going to read every single one of them until I figure out how to turn myself back into a gargoyle. And this time, I’m going to stay that way until Hudson can no longer hurt anyone.”

Jaxon opens his mouth to speak, but I shake my head. I’m not done yet.

“And if that means staying a gargoyle *forever*, then that is what I’ll do. It’s not what I *want* to do,” I tell them as they all start to protest. “But it’s what I will do, because no one—*no one*—is going to use me as a pawn ever again.”

It’s why I nearly died when I got here and why Jaxon and Flint nearly died, too. If they had just told me the truth when I first arrived, I wouldn’t have had to spend my first four days at Katmere bumbling around trying to figure things out as people tried to kill me. I wouldn’t have trusted the wrong people.

And maybe, just maybe I wouldn’t have ended up in those tunnels with Lia, and Jaxon wouldn’t have nearly died, and we wouldn’t be right here, right now, with Hudson taking some kind of psychotic vacation *in my goddamn body*.

Just the thought makes me sick, makes me want to cry. Makes me want to scream.

I want him gone, want him out of me right the hell now.

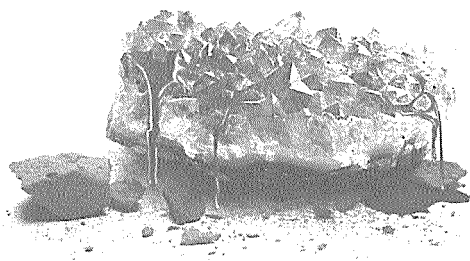
But if that’s not a possibility, I need to know how to keep myself and the people around me safe from him, no matter what.

I look from Jaxon to Macy to my uncle to Amka, only to find

them all staring back at me with a grudging respect in their eyes. Which means it's time to ask the question burning a hole in my chest. "Do I need to turn into a gargoyle again, or is there a way to block him out?"

Suddenly, I feel something flutter inside that feels an awful lot like a scream—of rage or agony or terror, I don't know which. But it's definitely a scream... And it's definitely not coming from me.

28



Sometimes Girls Just Wanna Take Charge

I barely have time to figure out what that means, if it means anything, when Jaxon says, “I’m taking you to the Bloodletter.”

“The Bloodletter?” I repeat, because it’s not a name I’ve ever heard before. And also because it’s not one that sounds particularly... inviting. I mean, in a world full of paranormals who don’t bat an eye at blood loss or near-death encounters, what kind of monster do you have to be to be called the Bloodletter?

It’s freaky as hell.

“The Bloodletter?” Uncle Finn repeats with the same skepticism I’m feeling. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“No,” Jaxon answers. “In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s a terrible fucking idea. But so is Grace turning back into a gargoyle for who knows how long.” He looks at me, and his face is full of worry and love and a touch of fear that he’s trying really hard not to let me see. “I don’t know if the Bloodletter can help figure out a way to quarantine Hudson in your head. But I do know that if anyone can, it’s her.”

“Who is she?” I ask, because I feel like I at least need to have some clue of what I’m walking into if I do this.

“She’s an Ancient,” Jaxon tells me. “A vampire who has been alive longer than almost anything on the planet. And she...*lives*...in an ice cave it doesn’t take that long to get to from here.”

I turn his words over in my head, trying to find a deeper meaning to them. I know there is one—it's obvious from the way looks are flying between my uncle and Amka. Macy seems oblivious, but that's obviously because she's as in the dark about this subject as I am.

"She's brutal," Amka says after a second. "Completely terrifying. But if anyone knows how to help you, she will."

I've got to admit, "brutal" is not exactly a word that evokes confidence in me. Then again, neither is "terrifying." And considering I'm standing in a room with one of the most powerful vampires in existence and no one here is the least bit afraid of him, I shudder to think of what this Bloodletter person might be like.

Especially since even Jaxon seems nervous at the idea of taking me to her.

"Do you know her?" I ask as apprehension fills me. "I mean, will she try to kill us on sight or will she at least listen to what we have to say?"

"She's brutal but not completely psychotic," Jaxon tells me. "And I do know her, yes. She raised me."

He doesn't say anything else, just kind of drops it out there, like being raised by the most terrifying vampire in existence is a totally normal thing. He might as well have pulled out a full-on *South Park* impression and said, *Move along, people. Nothing to see here.*

Which only convinces me more that there's a lot Jaxon's leaving out. And more concerned that what he's leaving out is really, really bad.

But if seeing this Bloodletter person will help get Hudson out of my head, and maybe even give me a glimpse into Jaxon's childhood, then I'm all in.

"How long does it take to get there?" I ask. "And when do we leave?"

"A few hours," Jaxon replies. "And we can leave now if you want."

"Now?" Uncle Finn asks, sounding less than impressed. "Why don't you at least wait until morning, when it's light out?"

"And give Hudson another chance to try to body snatch me again?" I ask, and I don't even have to pretend to be traumatized

at the thought. “I’d rather not.”

Not to mention, I’m too freaked out to sleep tonight—and maybe ever again. The fact that Hudson is inside me is terrifying and gross and weird. Can he read my thoughts, too? Like, is he in my head right now, hearing everything I’m thinking? Or are his talents limited to just taking over my body? *Just*. Give me a break.

How did my life get to this? Five months ago, I was in San Diego, and my biggest decision was where I was going to go to college. Now, I still have to decide that—or at least I think I do (do gargoyles even go to college?)—plus deal with evil alpha werewolves trying to take me down and psychopathic vampires living in my head.

If it wasn’t for Jaxon, I’d be pretty positive that I’ve traded down... way, way down.

Deciding the best way to circumvent Uncle Finn’s objections is to simply act like this is a done deal, I turn to Jaxon. “Do we need to call first and let her know we’re coming? I mean, if she has a phone in her”—I can’t believe I’m saying this—“ice cave?”

“She doesn’t need a phone. And if she doesn’t already know we’re coming, she’ll figure it out long before we get there.”

Because that’s not creepy at all. “Awesome.” I smile at him. “I’ll go get changed and meet you at the front entrance in fifteen minutes?”

Jaxon nods. “Make sure to layer up. We’ll be out in the cold for a while.”

By “a while,” I assume he means the whole time, considering the Bloodletter lives in an ice cave. Which is another weird-as-hell thing that I want to hear more about—including whether or not Jaxon grew up in the ice cave we are going to visit or if he grew up somewhere else and moved there after. I mean, because nothing says “retirement” like carving out a home for yourself in the middle of a frozen Alaskan cave.

“Give her at least thirty minutes, Jaxon,” my uncle says with the air of a man who knows when he’s been beaten.

“I’d rather get started as soon as possible,” I object.

“And I’d rather you had something to eat before you go.” He gives

me a hard look that lets me know in no uncertain terms that this is one thing he is not budging on. “It’s not like you can just drop into a restaurant out there in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness, and the Bloodletter definitely isn’t going to have anything *you* might want to eat. So stop by the cafeteria before you go. You can grab a sandwich to eat now, and I’ll make sure they also pack you some food to take with you—since I assume you’ll be staying overnight.”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead—hadn’t thought about anything other than getting Hudson out of me—and I’m grateful that Uncle Finn has. Especially considering I skipped lunch today, and my stomach is currently reminding me of that in no uncertain terms.

“Thanks, Uncle Finn.” I go up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

He responds by patting my back a little awkwardly, even as he says, “Be careful out there. And let Jaxon take the lead with the Bloodletter. He knows her better than anyone.”

I nod, even as I wonder what he means—and what it means for Jaxon that the person who raised him, the person he knows best in the world, is also a woman known for her viciousness.

“Come on, Grace. I’ll help you pick out what you need to wear,” Macy says as she starts bustling me toward the exit.

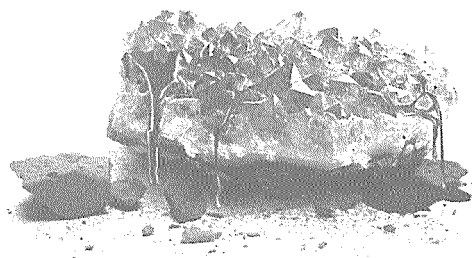
I go along with her, glancing back only to give Jaxon a wave and to mouth, *Thirty minutes*, at him.

He nods back, but I can see the upset in his eyes. And I get it. I do. I’m trying my best not to freak out about Hudson, too, but the truth is, I’m hanging on by a small freaking thread. Jaxon has to be feeling the same way, with an added dose of feeling responsible for the situation, because he’s Jaxon and that’s how he deals with every situation—especially ones that involve me.

“You ready?” Macy asks, watching as I turn from Jaxon to head up to our room.

“No,” I answer. But I keep walking forward. Because some days, what a girl wants to do and what she needs to do are two very different things.

29



I'm Too Sexy for
My Coat...and So
Is Everyone Else

“Nice coat,” Jaxon says when he sees me thirty minutes later, and the painfully tight line of his mouth curves upward.

I'm dressed in about six layers to protect me from the wilderness—including a hot-pink puffer coat that predators can probably see from fifty miles away—but when Macy proudly laid it on my bed, I didn't have the heart, or the energy, to say no.

“Don't start,” I say, then look him over for something to make fun of as well. Of course, there's nothing. He's dressed head to toe in all-black winter wear and he looks good, really good. Nothing at all like an escapee from a cotton-candy factory.

As we walk down the front steps of the school, I expect to see a snowmobile parked at the bottom of them. But there's nothing, and I look at Jaxon in confusion, even as I duck my face a little deeper into the wool scarf that covers me from cheekbone to chest.

“The temperature is going to drop at least twenty degrees in the next couple of hours,” he tells me as he pulls me close. “I don't want you out here any longer than you have to be.”

“Yeah, but won't a snowmobile help with that?” I ask. I mean, it's got to be better than hiking, right?

But Jaxon just laughs. “A snowmobile will only slow us down.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

"It means we're going to fade."

"Fade?" I have no idea what that means, but it doesn't sound particularly appealing. Then again, what about this situation is appealing? Visiting an ancient vampire and hoping she doesn't kill us? Living with a psychopath inside my head? Having no memory of the last four months?

Screw it. Whatever fading is, whatever Jaxon has in mind, has got to be better than anything else we're dealing with right now.

Which is why I just nod when Jaxon explains that fading is a vampire thing and it involves moving very, very fast from one place to another.

I start to ask how fast is fast, but does it matter? As long as we get to the Bloodletter and figure out what to do about Hudson before he decides to turn my life into a fictional TV show called *Bodysnatched*, we could swim to the Bloodletter's cave and I wouldn't care.

"So what exactly do I need to do?" I ask as Jaxon moves in front of me.

"I pick you up in my arms," he answers, "and then you hang on tight."

That doesn't sound too bad. Almost romantic, even.

Jaxon leans forward and sweeps me off my feet, one arm under my shoulders and the other under my knees. Once I'm safely balanced in his arms, he looks down at me and winks. "Ready?"

Not even close. I give him a thumbs-up. "Yeah, absolutely."

"Hang on!" he warns, then waits until I wrap both my arms around his neck as tightly as I can.

Once I do, he shoots me a grin. And then he starts to run.

Except it's not like any running I've ever experienced before. In fact, it's not like running at all. If I had to guess, it's more like we're *disappearing* from one place to the next in rapid succession, too fast for me to get my bearings on the new location before we *disappear* again.

It's strange and terrifying and exhilarating all at the same time, and I hold on as hard as I can, afraid of what will happen if I let go,

even though Jaxon has his arms gripping me tightly against his chest.

As he fades again and again, I keep trying to think, trying to focus on what I want to say to the Bloodletter or how I can lock Hudson out of my mind, but we're going so fast that real thinking is impossible. Instead, there's only instinct and the most basic follow-through of thought.

It's the strangest feeling in the world. And also one of the most freeing.

I don't have a clue how long we've been traveling when Jaxon finally stops at the top of a mountain. He sets me down slowly, which I'm grateful for, since my legs suddenly feel like rubber.

"Are we there?" I ask, looking around for a cave entrance.

Jaxon grins and, not for the first time, I realize how nice it is that Jaxon doesn't have to cover every inch of exposed skin the way I do when we're outside. I like being able to see his face, like even more being able to gauge his reaction to my words. "I wanted to show you the view. And I thought you might like a break."

"A break? We've only been moving a few minutes."

His grin becomes a laugh. "It's been more like an hour and a half. And we've gone almost three hundred miles."

"Three hundred miles? But that means we've been traveling at close to—"

"Two hundred miles an hour, yeah. Fading is more than just movement. I don't know how to describe it; it's kind of like flying—without a body. Every vampire starts practicing it at a young age, but I was always very, very good at it." He looks like a little kid, absurdly proud of himself.

"That's...incredible." No wonder I was having such a hard time holding on to images and thoughts as Jaxon faded. We weren't so much moving as bending reality.

As I turn all this information over in my head, I can't help thinking about a book I read in seventh grade, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. In it, he talks about people driving cars superfast on the regular

highways—like 130 miles an hour fast—and the government condoning it, because it keeps people from thinking. They have to concentrate on driving, and not dying, to the exclusion of everything else.

It felt a little like that when Jaxon was fading. Like everything else in my life, even the bad stuff, just disappeared, leaving only the most basic survival instincts in its place. I know Bradbury meant his book to be a warning, but fading is so cool that I can't help wondering how Jaxon feels about it.

I wonder if it feels for him the way it did for me, or if vampires are more able to handle it because they're built to go those kinds of speeds. I almost ask him, but he seems happy—really happy—and I don't want to ruin that with questions that might be hard to answer.

So I don't say anything at all, at least not until Jaxon turns me around and I get to see the view from the very top of this very tall mountain. And it is breathtaking. Massive peaks as far as the eye can see, miles upon miles of snow packed onto the tops and sides of mountains in a kind of frozen wonderland made even more precious by the fact that we really might be the only two people to ever stand here.

It's an awe-inspiring feeling...and a humbling one, which only grows as astronomical twilight closes in around us, turning the world to a faint purple.

The aurora borealis isn't out yet, but some of the stars are, and seeing them against this gorgeous, seemingly never-ending horizon helps put everything I'm going through in perspective. I can't help comparing what one human life—one human's problems—is in contrast to all this, just like I can't help wondering, for the very first time, what immortality feels like. I mean, I know what *I* feel when I'm standing here. Small, insignificant, finite. But what does someone like Jaxon feel, not only with the knowledge that he can climb—and conquer—this impossible mountain in minutes, but also with the knowledge that *he will be here as long as this mountain is*.

I can't imagine what that feels like.

I don't know how long we stand there staring off into the ever-

darkening distance. Long enough for Jaxon's arms to creep around me and for me to relax against him.

Long enough for the last little bit of sun to sink down below the mountains.

More than long enough for the cold to seep in.

Jaxon notices my first shiver and pulls away reluctantly. I know how he feels. Right now, I'd be okay with spending eternity up here on this mountain, just him and me and this incredible feeling of peace. I haven't experienced anything like it since before my parents died. And maybe not even then.

Peace can't last with Hudson inside you, a voice in the back of my head says, shattering the feeling of contentment. Could it be my gargoyle side again, warning me? I wonder. Obviously Hudson wouldn't warn me about himself.

Another question for my research, I decide, if my life ever slows down enough for me to actually get some done. Which reminds me, I need to set aside some time when I get back to Katmere to review the notes on gargoyles that Hudson apparently took. Another shiver races down my spine as I wonder what he was looking for about me.

"We need to go," Jaxon says, unzipping my backpack and pulling out a stainless-steel bottle of water. "But you need to drink something before we do. These altitudes can be brutal."

"Even on gargoyles?" I tease, leaning in to him again because it feels right.

"Especially on gargoyles." He smirks as he holds the bottle out to me.

I drink, more because Jaxon is standing there watching me than because I'm actually thirsty. It's a small thing, not worth arguing about, especially when he knows more about this climate than I do. The last thing I need is to add dehydration on top of everything else going on inside me right now.

"Can I have a granola bar?" I ask when I hand him the bottle to put back in my pack.

“Sure,” he says, digging in the backpack to find me one.

After chewing a few bites, I ask, “How long until we get to the Bloodletter’s cave?”

Jaxon lifts me into his arms again, considers it. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not we run into any bears.”

“Bears?” I squeak, because nobody said anything about bears.

“Aren’t they still hibernating?”

“It’s March,” he answers.

“What does that mean?”

When he doesn’t answer, I poke him in the shoulder. “Jaxon! What does that mean?”

He shoots me a wicked grin. “It means we’ll see.”

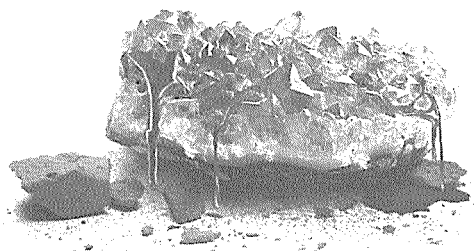
I poke him again. “What about—”

He takes off, full fade, before I can finish the thought, and then it’s just Jaxon and me flying down the side of a mountain. Well, Jaxon, me, and, apparently, a bunch of bears.

I so didn’t sign up for this.

30

Winner Winner Bloodletter's Dinner



It seems like only a few minutes before Jaxon stops again, but when I glance at my cell phone, I realize that another hour has gone by. That means that if we traveled at the same speed we did during the first half of the trip, we must be about five hundred miles from Katmere.

"We're here," Jaxon says, but I figured as much. It's in the tightness of his mouth, the sudden tenseness of his shoulders.

I look around, try to find the ice cave where we're supposed to meet the Bloodletter, but all I see is mountain in every direction. Mountain and snow. Then again, I'm not exactly an expert on ice caves.

"Is there anything I need to know?" I ask when he takes my hand, starts to lead me closer to the base of the mountain.

"Honestly, there's so much you need to know that I'm not sure where to start."

I laugh at first, because I think he's joking, but a quick glance at his face tells me that I've misread the situation. In response, the ball of tension in my stomach gets just a little tighter.

"Maybe the abbreviated version?" I suggest as we come to another sudden stop, this time right in front of two giant piles of snow.

"I don't know how much good it'll do, but I can try." He shakes his head, runs a gloved hand up and down his thigh in the most nervous gesture I've ever seen from him as the silence goes on and on and on.

I've just about decided that he's changed his mind, that he's not going to tell me anything, when Jaxon says in a voice that's more wind than whisper, "Don't get too close to her. Don't try to shake her hand when you meet her. Don't—"

He breaks off, and this time he runs a palm over his face instead of his thigh and, though it blends in with the howl of a nearby wolf, I swear I hear him say, "This is never going to work."

"You don't know that," I answer.

His head snaps up, and this time the obsidian gaze he focuses on me is like nothing I've ever seen from him. Silver flames dance in the depths of his eyes, and there is a mountain of despair there as well as a host of other emotions that I don't recognize or understand.

"You realize she's a vampire, right?"

"Of course." I don't know where he's going with this, but they were pretty clear back at the library.

"If she hasn't eaten in a while," Jaxon says, mouth twisted in a grimace I could never have missed, "she'll probably have a food source there."

"A food source?" I repeat. "You mean a human?"

"Yeah." He swallows hard. "I want you to know that I don't do what she does. I don't feed from people the way she does. I don't—"

"It's okay," I tell him as I realize that he's as nervous about what I'm going to think of his upbringing and the woman who raised him as he is about my safety and the fact that his brother is now hanging out inside me somewhere.

It's a shocking revelation about a guy who has never appeared anything but confident, and it warms me even as it makes me nervous.

Jaxon nods. "Sometimes she lures tourists in. Sometimes other paranormals bring her 'gifts' for her assistance." He holds my gaze. "Not me, though."

"Whatever happens in there is okay," I tell him, leaning forward so that my arms are wrapped around his waist and my chin is resting on his chest. "I promise."

“‘Okay’ is a bit of an overstatement,” he tells me. “But she is tens of thousands of years old, so it is what it is.” He hugs me back, then steps away. “Also, you need to let me do most of the talking in there. If she asks you a question, answer, of course, but she doesn’t particularly like strangers. Oh, and don’t touch her or let her touch you.”

Okay, now the warnings are just getting weird. “Why would I touch her?”

“Just give her a wide berth, I mean. She doesn’t like people very much.”

“I never would have guessed that, considering she lives in an ice cave in one of the most remote areas of Alaska.”

“Yeah, well, there’re a lot of reasons people live where they do. It’s not always about choice.”

I start to ask him what he means, but he might as well have hung a No Trespassing sign on that statement. So in the end, I don’t push. Instead, I just nod and ask, “Anything else I need to know?”

“Nothing I can explain to you in a couple of minutes. Besides, it’s getting colder. We should go in before you freeze.”

I am cold, my teeth all but chattering despite the many, many layers of clothing I’m currently wearing, so I don’t argue. Instead, I just step back and wait for Jaxon to lead the way.

And though I think I’m ready for anything, I have to admit the one thing I don’t expect is for Jaxon to raise a hand and lift an entire bank of snow several feet into the air. But as he does, he reveals a small opening in the base of the mountain: the entrance to the ice cave.

Jaxon drops the snow behind us, then moves his hands through the air in a complicated pattern. I try to watch what he’s doing, but he’s moving so fast that his hands are little more than a blur. I start to ask, but he’s concentrating so hard that I just stand there waiting for him to finish instead.

“Safeguards,” he tells me as he takes my hand and walks me into the cave.

“To protect people from wandering in?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “To keep my father out.”

Jaxon’s jaw tightens, and I get the sense he really doesn’t want me asking more questions. So I don’t.

Besides, it’s taking every ounce of concentration I have to keep from slipping and sliding down the steepest, narrowest, *iciest* path I have ever seen. Jaxon holds my hand tightly all the way, using his strength to steady me several times as we descend.

He’s got his phone in his left hand, the flashlight app on to illuminate our path, and we stop several times so that I can get a better foothold. Those are actually the times I like best, because they’re the only times I finally get to really look around the cave we’re walking into...and it is absolutely gorgeous. Everywhere I gaze are beautiful ice and rock formations—some sharp enough to impale a person, others stripped away by time and water to reveal their very origins.

Those are some of my favorites.

Eventually, we get to a fork in the path but continue down the right side.

There’s a second fork at the bottom of that path, and this time Jaxon takes us to the left. We go through another set of safeguards and then suddenly, everything flattens out. We’re in a huge room, filled with so many lit candles that, after the dark, I have to blink against the glare of them all.

“What is this place?” I whisper to Jaxon, because it seems like the kind of place that demands a whisper. Wide open, with high ceilings and brilliant rock and ice formations in all directions, it’s the most stunning natural wonder I’ve ever seen.

The place feels like a dream...at least until I glance toward one of the corners and realize there are chains and cuffs jammed into the ceiling—right above a couple of bloodstained buckets. There’s no one in the cuffs right now, but the fact that they exist at all takes away my awe at the beauty of the room.

Jaxon sees where I’m looking—it’s hard to be subtle when you imagine humans being hung and drained of their blood—and steps

forward to deliberately block my view. I don't argue with him; I already have a pretty good idea I'm going to be seeing that setup in my nightmares for some time to come. I don't need to see it in real life again. Ever.

Jaxon seems to feel the same way, because he's tugging me over to the largest arch pretty quickly now, even though the floor is still slippery and uneven.

"Ready?" he asks, right before we get there.

I nod, because honestly, what else am I going to do? And then, with Jaxon's arm wrapped tightly around my shoulders, I walk straight through the archway to meet the Bloodletter.

Welcome to the Ice Age



I don't know what I'm expecting when I walk through that frozen archway, but the perfectly put-together living room in front of me is. Not. It.

The room is gorgeous, the ceiling and walls decorated with more rock and ice formations...and behind glass, one very large expressionist painting of a field of poppies in all the shades of red and blue and green and gold.

I'm transfixed by it, much the way I was by the Klimt I saw in Jaxon's room when I first got to Katmere. Partly because it is beautiful and partly because the closer I get to it, the more convinced I become that the painting is an original Monet.

Then again, when you've been alive for thousands of years, I guess it's easier to get your hands on the works of the masters—maybe even before they became masters.

The rest of the room looks like any living room anywhere—with an upgrade from standard to absolutely stunning. A gigantic rock fireplace dominates one of the side walls. Bookshelves line the room, filled with books bound in cracked and colorful leather, and a giant rug that looks like a bouquet of flowers exploded stretches across the massive floor.

In the center of the room, facing away from the fire, are two

large wingback chairs in the same red as the poppies in the painting. Across from them, separated by a long rectangular glass coffee table, is a comfortable-looking sofa in harvest gold.

And sitting on the sofa, legs curled under her with a book in her lap, is a very sweet-looking old woman, with short gray curls and colorful reading glasses. She's dressed in a silk caftan in swirling shades of blue, and her light-brown skin glows in the candlelight as she closes her book and deposits it on the glass table.

"Four visits in as many months," she says, looking up at us with a soft smile. "Careful, Jaxon, or I'm going to start getting spoiled."

Her voice sounds like she looks—sweet, cultured, calm—and I feel a little like I'm being punked. This is the most dangerous vampire in existence? This is the woman Jaxon refers to as the *Bloodletter*? She looks like she'd be more at home knitting and playing with her grandchildren than she ever would hanging people upside down from the ceiling to drain their blood.

But Jaxon is moving us toward her, his head angled down in the most submissive gesture I have ever seen from him, so this has to be her, fuzzy slippers and all.

"You could never be spoiled," he answers as we come to a stop right in front of her. Or rather, Jaxon comes to a stop in front of her. I come to a stop several feet back, as Jaxon has deliberately angled his body between us. "I like the new color scheme."

"I was overdue for a change. Spring is a time for renewal, after all." She smiles ruefully. "Unless you're an old vampire like myself."

"Ancient isn't the same as old," Jaxon says to her, and I can tell from his voice that he means it. And also that he admires her a great deal, even if he doesn't trust her completely.

"Always such a charmer." She stands up, her gaze meeting mine for the first time. "But I'm guessing *you* already know that."

I nod, more cognizant than ever of Jaxon's warning to let him do the talking. Because while the *Bloodletter* might look like the sweetest grandma ever, her green eyes gleam with shrewdness—and

more than a little bit of avarice—as she looks me over. Add in the fact that I can see the tips of her fangs glowing against her bottom lip in the firelight, and I’m beginning to feel a little bit like a fly to the proverbial spider.

“You brought your mate,” she tells him with an arch look, one that speaks volumes I don’t begin to understand.

“I did,” he replies.

“Well, let me get a look at her, then.” She walks forward, pressing a hand to the side of Jaxon’s biceps in an effort to guide him over a few steps.

Jaxon doesn’t budge, which makes the Bloodletter laugh, a bright, colorful sound that echoes off the vaulted ceilings and ice-hard walls. “That’s my boy,” she says. “Always the overprotective one. But I can assure you this time, there’s no need.”

Again, she presses on his biceps in a very obvious “scoot over a little” gesture. Again, he doesn’t move so much as an inch.

Annoyance replaces amusement in her bright-green eyes, and she sends him a look that, not going to lie, has me shaking a little in my shoes. Certain that she can smell it, I tamp down the small quiver of fear and meet her curious gaze with one of my own.

I can tell she likes that, just as I can tell how unhappy she is with Jaxon’s refusal to bend to her will. Deciding to take it out of both their hands, I step forward and smile at her. “I’m Grace,” I say, and though convention suggests that I offer my hand, Jaxon’s earlier warning still rings in my ears. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

She gives me a delighted smile in response but makes no move to touch me, either—even before Jaxon lets out an obvious sound of displeasure.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, too. I’m glad everything has...worked itself out with you.”

Surprised by her words, I glance at Jaxon. He doesn’t take his eyes off the woman who raised him, but he does answer my silent question. “She knows you’re a gargoyle. I came to see her twice when

you were locked in stone.”

“He left no stone unturned, as it were, when he was looking for a way to set you free. But alas, gargoyles haven’t been my specialty in quite a long while.” Her gaze seems to go far away as she continues. “I did hope to change that once, but it was not to be.”

Even though I already know that Jaxon did anything and everything he could to help me when I was trapped as a gargoyle, it still warms me to hear it—especially from this woman he very obviously respects.

“Thank you for trying to help me,” I tell her. “I appreciate it.”

“There wasn’t anything for me to try,” she answers. “Much to your mate’s chagrin. But I would have helped him if I could. I suggested he bring you to me, in fact. I’m glad he’s finally taken my advice.”

She moves a few steps back, gesturing to the two red chairs before once again settling herself on the couch.

“I always planned on bringing Grace to meet you eventually,” Jaxon says.

Her eyes soften at that, and for the first time, I see genuine affection in her expression as she looks at Jaxon. I find myself relaxing just a little at the sight of it—not because I think she won’t hurt me but because I’m pretty sure she won’t do anything that would harm Jaxon.

“I know.” She leans forward and pats his hand. As she does, I see a softening in Jaxon, too, a momentary dropping of his guard as he looks at this woman he obviously loves but just as obviously doesn’t trust.

It’s such a weird dynamic that I can’t help feeling sorry for the both of them, even as I wonder what it’s like. Before their deaths, I trusted my parents implicitly—it never occurred to me not to.

And though I’ve found out things about them since they died—things like my father was a warlock and maybe they knew about the gargoyle thing all along—at least I still know, even if they lied to me, that they would never have hurt me.

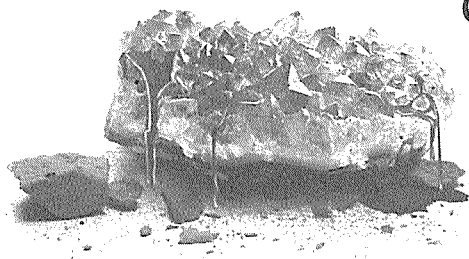
Jaxon’s mother scarred him. His brother tried to kill him. And this woman, who obviously had a major impact on his life and who

obviously loves him, has Jaxon so tense, so on edge, that I'm afraid he might shatter at the first wrong move.

Silence stretches between us before Jaxon finally says, "I'm sorry to do this on the first night that you meet Grace, but we need your help."

"I know." She looks from Jaxon to me and back again. "And I will do what I can. But there are no easy solutions to what plagues you. There are, however, many, many chances for things to go wrong."

32



One Person's Reality Is Another Person's Total Mind F*ck

That sounds...awful.

I'm more than a little freaked when I turn to Jaxon, but he just gives me a reassuring look as he rubs the back of my hand with his thumb before turning back to the Bloodletter.

He does an amazing job of relating the events since I've come back, so much so that the Bloodletter's eyes glaze over only once in the telling. When it's done, she stares at me for a few beats, then asks me to take a walk with her.

I look to Jaxon—not for permission so much as reassurance that she's not taking me to some inner cavern to drain my blood—and he gives me a slight nod. It's an uneasy nod, but it's a nod nonetheless.

Not the most reassuring thing in the world, but it's not like I really have a choice at this point.

The Bloodletter smiles when I get up and beckons me closer with one beringed hand. "Don't worry, Grace; we won't go far. I do my best thinking while I walk."

The Ancient vampire leads me through a double arch into another, darker room. But the second we walk in, the room springs to life. The sun is shining, the sand beneath my boots is sparkling, and in the distance, I can see, and hear, the roar of the ocean waves.

"How—" I stumble to a stop and stare at the familiar blue of the

Pacific Ocean. And not just any part of the Pacific, but my beloved La Jolla Cove. I recognize it from the tidal pools around the sides of the relatively small beach and the way the ocean washes up on the sand and the rocks in a rhythm as familiar as my own breathing.

“How did you do this?” I ask, blinking back the rush of homesick tears from my eyes. The Bloodletter has given me a gift beyond measure. No way am I going to waste one second of my time here crying. “How did you know?”

“I know a lot of things, Grace, and I can do almost as many.” She shrugs delicately. “Come on. Let’s go walk by the water.”

“Okay,” I agree, even though I know the water isn’t real. Even though I know I’m in the middle of a giant illusion. The fact that it feels real is enough for me right now.

We don’t talk as we make our way up the beach to the slowly rolling waves.

“If you want your mind and body back, my darling—” She stops to stare out over the vast ocean for what feels like an eternity before turning to face me, her eyes swirling that eerie electric green again. “It’s going to require sacrifice. Probably more than you’re willing to give.”

I swallow. “What does that mean exactly?”

But she pats my hand and simply says, “That’s something for you to learn another day. For now, why don’t you take a moment and feel the water?”

I look down and realize we’re near where the ocean should be kissing my toes if I were to move just a few more inches to the side.

“But it’s not real,” I tell her. “There’s nothing there.”

“‘Real’ is in the eye of the beholder,” she answers. “Feel the water.”

“How are you doing this?” I gasp as I let the water run through my fingers. The feel of it gets me in the gut, even though I try not to let it. But how can I not when it reminds me of all the times I was there with my parents or Heather?

“A good illusion covers all the bases,” she tells me. “A *great* illusion

makes it impossible to tell where reality leaves off and deception begins.”

She waves her hand, and just like that, we’re in the middle of the desert, sand where there was only ocean before.

I swallow my instinctive protest, my urge to beg her to bring the water back. To bring my home back. And instead plunge my hand into the sand right in front of me.

I come away with a handful of it, just as I knew I would, and when I let it leak through my fist back onto the ground, some of it sticks on the wetness of my fingers so that I have to brush it off against my ski pants.

“I don’t understand what’s happening here.”

“Because you don’t believe what you see,” she snaps.

“But I can’t believe it. It’s not *real*.”

“It’s as real as you want it to be, Grace.” Another wave of her hand and a sandstorm kicks up, hard and fast. Grains of sand whip against my face, fill my nose and my mouth until I can barely breathe.

“Enough,” I manage to wheeze out between coughs.

“Is it enough?” the Bloodletter asks in a voice as cold as the Alaskan wilderness she has made her home. “Do you understand what I’m trying to tell you?”

No, I don’t. Not even a little bit. But I’m afraid if I tell her that, I’m going to end up buried under a thousand pounds of sand, so I just nod.

But I do try to focus, not just on what she’s saying but on the deeper meaning of what she wants me to understand.

Her gaze holds mine, her green eyes urging me to think beyond my simple understanding of the world. To recognize that some things have to be believed to be understood instead of the other way around.

It’s a leap of faith, one I’m not sure I’m comfortable making after everything that’s already happened. But what other choice do I have? I can believe or I can get swept away—not just by the sand she is continuing to blow my way but by Hudson’s dark and overwhelming will.

I swallow, knowing there really is no other option for me. And so I close my eyes, lower my defenses just a little, and let her words swirl in my mind, settle in my bones, become my reality.

The moment I do, the illusion of this world fades into something that feels even more right. Something that feels like coming home.

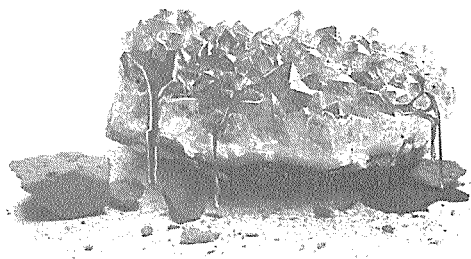
Suddenly, there's another voice in my head, and it's not the one I'm used to, the one that warns me of bad things to come. No, this voice is low and sardonic. It's also familiar—really familiar.

“Well, it’s about time.”

“Oh shit.” My stomach bottoms out. “Did you hear him?” I demand of the Bloodletter. “Tell me you heard him.”

“It’s okay, Grace,” she answers. And if she says any more, I don’t know because—just like that—the world around me goes completely black.

33



It's Hard to Pick My Battles When My Battles Keep Picking Me

*S*omething isn't right.

It's the first thought I have as I slowly open my eyes. My head hurts and my stomach is roiling like I'm going to throw up. I notice I'm lying on a bed, in what I think is a dimly lit bedroom. Which doesn't make sense, because the last thing I remember is talking to the Bloodletter—right up until I heard someone in my head with a British accent.

My eyes fly open as I remember Hudson, and I bolt upright, then wish I hadn't as the room spins around me. I do my best to breathe through the nausea and focus on remembering what's important. Namely, Hudson, and what he did or didn't do.

Did he take control of my body again?

Did he hurt Jaxon or the Bloodletter, and is that why they're not here?

Worse, did *I* hurt them?

I glance down at myself, checking for blood—something I'll probably do every time I wake up for the rest of my life now, courtesy of Hudson's little werewolf-hunting expedition. So, thanks for that, Hudson. I appreciate the mental scars.

"Sorry, I didn't think he'd bleed so much. It was just a little prick. Then again, so is he."

Oh God. I didn't imagine it. Damn. I close my eyes and lie back down, praying that none of this is actually happening. That it's all just a really bad dream.

"Stop talking to me!" I order.

"Why on earth would I do that now that you can finally hear me? Do you have any idea how boring it gets in here? Especially when you spend so much of your time mooning all over the place about my loser brother. It's nauseating, really."

"Yeah, well, feel free to leave anytime you want," I suggest.

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" Exasperation colors his tone. *"But you got pissed off about that, too, even though it was your idea. No offense, Grace, but you're a hard woman to please."*

This isn't happening. It can't be. The body snatching was bad enough, but now I have to deal with this disembodied voice in my head, too? And not just any disembodied voice but one that belongs to a psychopath with a full-on British accent? *How is this my life?*

"Hey now, I resent that. I'm not disembodied. At least not completely."

"I see you're not even going to argue about the psychopath part." I shake my head in astonishment.

"It's called picking your battles. You should try it sometime. You might end up in the infirmary less. Just saying."

The fact that he might be right about this one specific comment only annoys me more. "Is there a point to this conversation?"

"Grace," he says softly. *"Open your eyes."*

I don't want to do it. I don't even know why, except that I really, really don't want to.

But at the same time, it's sort of a compulsion. The kind that I know is going to hurt later—like when I chipped my tooth in seventh grade and couldn't resist touching it with my tongue, even though I knew it was so sharp, it would cut me. That's what it feels like listening to Hudson tell me to open my eyes.

"Wow, so I'm a toothache now?" He sounds insulted. *"Thaaaaanks."*

“If you were a toothache, I’d go to the dentist and let her drill you out of my head,” I tell him, my voice filled with the frustration I can’t get away from. “Without novocaine.”

“You’ve got quite the mean streak in you, Grace. Does it make me a masochist if I admit that I like it?”

Ugh. Seriously? I can stand the voice in my head. I can maybe even put up with the fact that that voice belongs to Hudson. But the sexual innuendo is going to make me vomit.

I finally stop fighting myself and decide to open my eyes if it means it will shut him up, even for a second. Then really wish I hadn’t because—

Holy hell. He’s right there, one wide shoulder resting against the icy wall near a lamp, long legs crossed at the ankle, obnoxious smirk on his ridiculously pretty face. He’s got the signature Vega high cheekbones and strong jawline, but that’s where the similarity to Jaxon ends. For where Jaxon’s eyes may be as black as a starless night, Hudson’s are an endless blue sky. Thick eyebrows, the same shade of rich dark brown as his short hair, slant downward, his gorgeous eyes narrowing as he takes in every detail of my reaction. And that’s when I realize, Jaxon might ooze power and danger in his every movement, but Hudson has always been the real one to fear. Jaxon was a blunt weapon next to his brother, who seems to be cataloging my every weakness, every nuance and emotion, with surgical precision. This guy would know exactly how to hurt you the most—and you’d never see it coming.

Nothing in the world could have stopped the shiver that slides down my spine.

I wouldn’t be surprised if he turned around and there was a sign plastered across the back of his silver-gray dress shirt spelling out villain in huge black letters.

That’s how perfect he is at looking bad. At *being* bad. And that’s before I even notice that his free hand is shoved negligently into the pocket of a pair of expensive-looking black dress pants.

Because of course it is. Looks like the devil really does wear Gucci...

"These are Versace," he answers, indignation ripe in his tone.

"Who cares?" I demand as my brain finally catches up with my observational skills. "Have you been standing there all along?"

"Yes, Grace, I've been here all along," he tells me with a long-suffering sigh. "No offense, but where else would I be? We're kind of attached, in case you didn't notice."

"Believe me, I've noticed."

"Then why ask a silly question?"

I roll my eyes at him. "I'm so sorry. I'll stop asking silly questions if you stop—oh, I don't know—hijacking my body to try to kill people."

"I already told you, it was just supposed to be a little prick. It is not my fault werewolves have such abysmal tempers." He lifts one dark, perfect brow. "But I've got to say, you are a feisty one. Do you really think Jaxon can handle you?"

"It's none of your business what Jaxon can and can't handle."

"So that's a solid no, then?" This time, he flashes a sly little smile that should be obnoxious but somehow only ends up making his already perfect face look even more perfect.

"Aww, you think I have a perfect face?" He turns his head to the side to emphasize his sky-high cheekbones and chiseled jaw. "What's your favorite feature?"

"You weren't supposed to hear that."

"I'm in your head, Grace. I hear everything."

"But I see you over there, and your lips are moving." All of a sudden, his words register. "*Everything?*"

He holds up one finger. "First, only you can see me. Your mind is manifesting me. And two..." His smile gets even slyer. "*Everything.*"

I duck my head so he can't see the heat scorching my cheeks. "I have no idea how to respond to that."

"No worries." Hudson winks at me. "I'm used to girls being speechless around me."

I groan. “I wasn’t worried.” *And are you really going to keep doing this?*

“Doing what?” He pastes a mock-innocent look on his face.

“Commenting on my thoughts, even when I’m not talking to you.” I groan again and flop back onto the bed.

He grins. “Consider it extra motivation.”

“For what?” I demand.

“I don’t know.” He pretends to study his nails. “Getting me out of your head, maybe?”

“Believe me, I don’t need any extra motivation. The sooner I get you gone, the sooner I never have to see you again.”

I brace myself for his next sarcastic remark, figuring it will be a doozy. But for long seconds, he doesn’t say anything at all. Instead, he pulls a ball out of thin air and starts tossing it up in front of his face and then catching it again.

Once, twice, then again and again. At first, I’m grateful for the silence—and the peace that comes with it. But the longer it goes on, the more antsy I become. Because the only thing worse than knowing everything Hudson is thinking is knowing *nothing* that he’s thinking. I can’t help but guess he’s plotting to murder me like I’m plotting to murder him right now.

Eventually, though, he turns his attention back to me. “See,” he says with another of those deadpan looks of his, “I told you, you had a mean streak.”

Then he tosses the ball up in the air yet again.

“Yeah, well, I’d rather have a mean streak than an asshole streak,” I tell him.

“Everyone has an asshole streak, Grace.” He looks me straight in the eyes when he says this, and for the first time, it feels sincere. *He* feels sincere. “The only difference is whether or not they’re honest enough to let you see it. And those who aren’t? Those are the ones you need to watch out for.”

“Why does that feel like a warning?” I wonder aloud.

“Because you’re not some pathetic little human anymore. You’re a gargoyle, and when it comes to how people feel about gargoyles—knowing one, owning one, possessing one—nothing and nobody is quite what they seem.”

“Including you?” I shoot back, even as a shiver works its way down my back at his warning.

“Obviously me,” he agrees, sounding bored and annoyed. “But my point is, I’m not the only one.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, don’t know if he’s just messing with my mind or if there really is some truth to what Hudson is saying. Before I can decide, he steps away from the wall. But instead of coming toward me, he moves farther back into the shadows of the room.

“Here comes one now,” he whispers deep in the recesses of my brain.

“What do you mean?” I ask, just as softly.

He shakes his head, refuses to say anything else.

And it’s not until I turn away, not until the Bloodletter calls my name, that I realize that the ball Hudson tossed up in the air? It never came back down.

34



This Place Isn't Big Enough for the Both of Us

“Grace, are you awake yet?” The Bloodletter’s voice seems farther away than expected.

“I’m awake,” I tell her, pushing myself into a sitting position and leaning back against the pillows. “I’m sorry. Hudson...”

“What about Hudson?” the Bloodletter asks, leaning forward with watchful eyes.

For the first time, I realize that the shadows were hiding bars that are between her and me. Even worse is the realization that *I’m on the wrong side of those bars.*

I bolt upright then, my gaze searching the shadowy darkness until it collides with Jaxon’s. “What’s going on?” I demand in a voice made shrill with fear. “Why am I in a cage?”

“It’s okay,” he soothes.

“It’s *not* okay. I’m not some animal in the zoo, Jaxon. Get me out of here. Now.”

I start to reach for the bars, then think better of it, since they’ve got this weird, electric glow to them and I can’t help wondering what that means...not to mention what it will mean for me if I touch them.

“We can’t do that, Grace. Not yet,” the Bloodletter answers.

“Why not?” For the first time, I start to wonder if Hudson’s words were actually true. If he wasn’t just saying those things to

mess with me.

“Much as I enjoy messing with you, Grace, I’m not in the habit of issuing warnings for no reason,” Hudson admonishes from the shadows.

“Stop talking to me!” I practically shout back. “Can’t you see I’m in trouble here?”

Jaxon and the Bloodletter exchange a surprised look.

“Who are you talking to, Grace?” Jaxon asks.

“They can’t hear me,” Hudson reminds me, and I clamp my jaw tight.

“It’s okay,” the Bloodletter says. “I know Hudson is in there with you. I’m the one who put you to sleep when I realized just how strong Hudson’s hold on you is.”

Part of me wants to ask how she knows, but then I figure, why wouldn’t she? What’s the point of being that old if you don’t know a lot about a lot?

“Oh, please.” Hudson lets out a long-suffering sigh and steps away from the shadows again to pace in the narrow space next to my bed. “She makes me sound like a cult leader. I haven’t forced you do anything you didn’t want to do.”

I turn to him in shock. “You mean besides stealing the athame and trying to kill Cole? Oh, and the fact that I’ve now blacked out *three times* in as many days?”

“To be fair, Cole deserved it. And we didn’t *try* to kill him.”

I watch as the Bloodletter grabs Jaxon’s arm and pulls him away from the cage bars to tell him something privately. Fuck my life. More secrets.

But I use the space to hiss quietly back at Hudson. “You’re right. We didn’t do anything. *You* did.”

He sighs and leans against the ice wall again. “Potato, po-tah-to. But back to the situation at hand. I warned you not to trust her.”

“You warned me *after* she’d already put me in a cage. What good is that?” I snipe back.

“And besides, you’re the reason I’m even in this cage, so you’re the one I should be blaming.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Same song, different singer.” He waves a careless hand.

“I have no idea what that means.”

“It means more powerful people than you have bent over backward trying to absolve my little brother of guilt. I don’t even know why I’m surprised that you’ve turned out to be just like the rest of them.”

“I’m not trying to absolve Jaxon of anything!” I whisper-shout. “I’m just trying to get out of this damn cage. How did you come back without a body so that I’d be lucky enough to have you trapped in my head in the first place?”

“I came back with a body.” He shakes his head and glances at Jaxon, still conversing with the Bloodletter. “I was confused, too, but I know that much. The last thing I remember is my brother trying to kill me and I was moving on instinct, fading toward him to protect myself. When you turned to stone, I’m pretty sure you took my faded body that was still re-forming with you. And, well”—he spreads his hands wide—“here we are.”

That makes a twisted kind of sense to me, even though I don’t want it to be true. But what else could have happened? I didn’t shift to my gargoyle form on purpose—I didn’t even know it was possible. But if he was fading into me at the exact same time, maybe it messed with how I shifted. Or maybe I messed with how he faded. Either way, it really might be *my* fault that he’s trapped in my head. Ugh. So not what I wanted to realize.

I turn back to the Bloodletter with that knowledge churning in my head and try to get her attention again. “What do I need to do for you to let me out of here?”

The Bloodletter and Jaxon walk back to the cage bars. Jaxon’s face looks extremely worried, and I suddenly have the urge to hug him, to tell him everything is going to be all right.

“You’re the one in the cage, and you want to ease *his* suffering.

Point fucking made,” Hudson growls, but I ignore him, holding Jaxon’s gaze instead.

The Bloodletter interrupts. “You need to let me teach you how to build a wall so you can lock Hudson out. You have to put a barrier between the two of you, Grace. Hudson can’t be trusted.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” she asks. “Do you really? Because I don’t think you can fully understand until you know him. Until you see how he operates, up close and personal. You may not believe it, but the time will come when you want to empathize with him.”

“I would never—”

“Oh yes, you would. You will. But you can’t. You have to stay strong, to be on your guard at all times. No one in your world is more dangerous than Hudson. No one else can do what he can. He’ll tell you anything you *need* to hear, everything you *want* to hear. He’ll lie to you, he’ll trick you, and when you lower your guard, he’ll kill you. Or worse. He’ll kill everyone you love, just because he can.”

Hudson stops pacing, his face turning to stone as he waits for my reaction. Only his eyes are alive, a vivid, storm-tossed blue that delves into the very heart of me.

“I won’t let that happen. I swear,” I tell her, even as panic races through me. “How can I lock him out?”

“That’s what I want to show you,” she says. “If you’ll let me.”

“Of course I’ll let you. I thought that was the whole reason we were here—so you could teach me how to get rid of him. I just don’t understand why you felt like you needed to lock me up.” I turn to Jaxon. “Or why *you* thought it was okay to let her.”

He looks sick. “I didn’t—”

“He doesn’t have a choice. And neither do you. It’s bad enough that Hudson could take over your body. But now that he’s started talking to you, we have to find a way to create a partition between you and him before it’s too late. This cage will give us the freedom to do that, since he’s behind bars, too.”

I notice that she doesn't mention that it protects anyone *inside* the cage from his power—namely me—but I don't call her on it. Not when my stomach is doing a triple somersault in the worst possible way and I have bigger, more important things to question her about. "Too late?"

"Yes, too late," she reiterates. "The longer we wait, the greater the chance that the next time he takes you over..." She pauses and glances at Jaxon before turning back to me. "The next time, you might not be able to find your way back."

Her voice echoes ominously throughout the cavern, her warning hitting me like a wrecking ball. "That can't really happen, can it?" I whisper through a throat tight with horror.

"Of course not!" Hudson starts pacing the room again. "I mean, seriously. Who would actually choose to spend their life as a Jaxon Vega fangirl?"

I ignore him.

"It's absolutely possible," the Bloodletter assures me. "And the longer he stays in you, the harder it's going to be for you to get him out—especially if he decides he doesn't want to go."

Hudson runs a hand through his hair, his fingers tangling in the longer, wavy strands on top. "Believe me, that will not be a problem, Grace. I want out of you at least as much as you want me out."

"What happens if he decides to stay?" I ask. "I mean, how does it happen?"

The Bloodletter studies me for several seconds, as if weighing how much she wants to say. "First, he'll start to control you more often—and for longer periods of time. When he lets you go, it'll be harder for you to remember who you are, harder to fit back into your everyday life, until it will seem easier to just let him take over. Until one day you just give up completely."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Grace. You have to trust me." Hudson sounds almost as frantic as I feel. "Don't build the wall. Don't let her lock me up."

I turn and stare into Hudson's eyes. He's stopped pacing now, and we both just hold the other's gaze for what seems like minutes. I can't tell what he's thinking, but as he's proven, he can hear every one of my thoughts. *I wish I could trust you, but you know that's impossible.*

His shoulders slump, but he nods. "*I know.*" He must think the words this time, because his lips don't move, yet I hear each one like a gunshot.

"Don't listen to him," Jaxon tells me urgently. "Whatever he's saying to you is a lie. You can't trust Hudson. You can't—" He breaks off all of a sudden, his eyes wide with shock as he presses a hand to his chest.

"Stop him, Grace." The Bloodletter's voice slices like a lash.

"Stop what?" I demand as Jaxon stumbles forward a few steps before falling to his knees.

"You're killing him," she answers hoarsely, and that's when I realize my hand is outstretched toward Jaxon, power like I've never felt before racing through my body.

I gasp, drop my hand. But Jaxon continues to clutch at his chest.

"Stop it!" I yell at Hudson. And when that doesn't work, I beg. "Please stop! Don't hurt him. Please don't *make* me hurt him."

And just like that, the flow of power evaporates.

"Jaxon?" I whisper as he slowly drops his hands back to his sides. "Are you all right?"

"You're a coward," he answers, looking at me with such contempt that it bruises something deep inside me. At least until I realize it's Hudson he's talking to, not me. "Hiding inside a girl who doesn't even understand her own power yet, using her to do your dirty work. You're pathetic."

"Fuck you!" Hudson snarls, and he sounds like a totally different person—one more than capable of doing all the terrible things Jaxon once told me he did. "You don't know anything about me!"

I don't repeat what he said to Jaxon. In fact, after what he just used me to do, I refuse to acknowledge him at all.

“How did he get through the cage?” Jaxon demands as he turns on the Bloodletter. “You said we had to put Grace in the cage to neutralize his powers. How did he get through?”

“I’m not sure, though I would imagine it has something to do with the mating bond. Even magic this strong”—she gestures to the bars between us—“can’t neutralize the bond completely. He must have found a way to use it to reach you.”

“But walling him up will stop him, right? He’ll never be able to hurt Jaxon like that again?” I choke out the words.

“It will stop him,” the Bloodletter answers. “For at least a week, maybe even two. Hopefully it will be long enough for you to do what needs to be done to banish him completely.”

“Don’t do it, Grace,” Hudson tells me. “You can’t trust her.”

Maybe not, but I can’t trust you, either, so I’m going to go with the person who can help me the most.

“This is not how things were supposed to happen.” He shakes his head. “Why won’t you trust me?”

Maybe because you’re a raging psychopath, and I am tired of doing your bidding.

I turn to the Bloodletter. “I’m ready. Show me how to build the wall.”

I'm Going to Wash That Psychopath Right Out of My Hair



The Bloodletter assesses me for several seconds before she answers. “Every single paranormal finds a different way to build a shield inside them. They do what feels natural—what feels right—to them as they explore and grow into their powers.

“At a different time, that’s how you would learn to build *your* wall. As a shield to keep your powers from adversely affecting the people around you.”

“But I don’t have any powers,” I tell her, more than a little confused. “I mean, except the ability to turn to stone. I’m still skeptical on the flying part.”

She smiles a little at that and shakes her head. “You have more power than you know, Grace. You just have to find it.”

I have no idea what that means, but at this point, I’m willing to try anything. Especially if it means Hudson can’t hurt Jaxon again—or anyone else. “Is that how I build the wall or the shield or whatever you want to call it? By channeling my power?”

“Not this time. Because you’re not trying to keep your powers in. You’re trying to separate yourself and your powers from Hudson and *his* powers. So while we would normally be talking about a shield, right now, we have to talk about a wall.”

“Inside me.”

“Yes. It won’t last forever—as you just saw, Hudson’s power is too great to be contained for long, and eventually he *will* break the wall down. But hopefully we’ll be able to buy you some time before that happens. Maybe a week or two, I’d guess.”

I look from her to Jaxon. “Time to do what?”

Now Jaxon is the one who answers. “Time to get what we need to perform the spell that will get Hudson out of you once and for all.”

“There’s a spell for that?” Relief swamps me, and I sink back onto the edge of the bed. “Well, why don’t we just do it right now?”

“Eager much?” Hudson drolls.

Once again, I ignore him. He’s not worth talking to, especially not after the shit he just pulled.

“Because, like all magic, it has a price,” the Bloodletter tells me. “And that price includes certain accoutrements that you don’t have yet.”

“What kind of *accoutrements* are we talking about here?” I ask as I picture eye of newt and wing of bat and God only knows what else. Then again, before Katmere Academy, most of my knowledge about witches came from *Hocus Pocus* and *Charmed*, so maybe I don’t have the clearest picture of it all. “And where do we get them?”

“When you were...gone, and I was looking for a way to help you, I found the spell Lia used to bring Hudson back,” Jaxon says. “She had the items she needed, but they didn’t hold as much power as she needed them to. Plus, she had to bring him back from the dead and not just re-form him from fading, which is all we’ve got to do.

“Lia didn’t have enough power on her own to get the job done, so she needed mine to complete the spell...of course that definitely would have killed me. So this time, I’m all for finding the most powerful objects we can, just to make sure no one has to die. Except maybe Hudson, but I’m okay with that.”

“I’m fine doing it Lia’s way,” Hudson interjects. He’s back to lounging indolently against a wall near the bars.

“That *is* shocking,” I agree, then get mad at myself for answering him, giving him the attention he obviously wants. Especially since

he's now got a ridiculously smug look on his face.

"Yeah, well, Lia was totally unreasonable when it came to Hudson, even when he was alive," Jaxon mutters. It takes me a moment to figure out what he's talking about, but then I realize he thinks my last comment was to him. "But she knew how to do her research. The full spell calls for at least four powerful items."

Four items. That doesn't sound so bad.

The Bloodletter adds, "Well, four to bring him back as he was, a vampire. Five if you want to bring him back as a human, stripped of his powers."

Even better. "So how do we get all five?" I ask.

"Wait a minute!" Hudson is up and pacing again, indolence replaced by a quiet kind of desperation. "You don't need five to get me out of here. You only need four."

Maybe, but five will make sure you never hurt anyone again, and right now, that sounds pretty good to me.

"You don't get to make that choice!" Hudson tells me.

Considering you just used your powers to attack my boyfriend and you're in my head...yeah, Hudson, I'm pretty sure I do.

But I *am* curious. "Why five items to bring him back human but only four to bring him back?"

The Bloodletter narrows her eyes on me, clearly not enjoying being questioned.

"If you wouldn't mind," I tack on nervously.

Which must do the trick, because she answers. "To strip a paranormal of their powers requires the magical consent of all five ruling factions, by covenant. But simply bringing him back as a vampire, since he's already crossed into the mortal coil again, requires only power. Enormous power. And that power can be found in magical objects."

Jaxon nods. "Every faction has magical objects that hold the most power, so we'll need at least four from the different factions to have enough power." But then his eyebrows shoot up, and he pivots to the

Bloodletter. "Wait. How can we have an item from all five factions if Grace is the only gargoyle in existence?"

As though she'd been expecting this question, she continues. "The four items needed to bring him back are the eyetooth of an alpha werewolf. The moonstone from a powerful warlock. The bloodstone from a born vampire. And the full bone of a dragon. Which combined should have enough power." The Bloodletter's eyes take on that eerie electric-green glow as she mentions the last item we need. "But you'll need the heartstone a mythical Unkillable Beast protects to have enough power to *break* the covenant and strip Hudson of his powers."

Jaxon doesn't seem to notice the change in his mentor. "We can get some of the items at school," he insists. "A couple of the other ones we'll have to travel to find, though."

"And I can ensure the bloodstone comes to you," the Bloodletter promises.

"How are you going to do that?" Jaxon turns to her and asks. "Bloodstones are incredibly rare."

The Bloodletter shrugs. "People owe me favors."

"That's not an answer," Jaxon insists. Her only response is an attempt to stare him down, holding his gaze with the green ice of hers. Somehow, Jaxon doesn't flinch under her glacial stare.

"Looks like they're going to be at that for a while," Hudson says with an exaggerated eye roll. "I say we make a break for it."

"Yes, because the only thing worse than having you trapped in my head is having you trapped in my head while I wander the Alaskan wilderness, freezing and alone." The *thanks but no thanks* is implied.

"No pain, no gain." He chuckles.

"Easy for you to say when you'll be getting all the gain and none of the pain."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." There's an inflection in his voice that has me wondering what's up. But when I glance back at him, his face is as blank as the snow Jaxon and I traversed to get here.

Still, Hudson has a point about what looks to be turning into

the world's longest staring contest between the world's two most stubborn people. If I don't break it up soon, I'm pretty sure we'll be here all night.

"So this wall thing I need to build," I say into the tense silence that blankets the cavern. "How exactly do I do that? Because I am more than ready to take a break from Hudson Vega."

36

DIY Exorcism



“**Y**ou already started,” the Bloodletter tells me, “before I put you to sleep. You started laying the groundwork instinctively.”

“But how did I do that? How do I build this mythical, mystical wall? And what makes you think I’ve already started?” I ask, more confused than ever.

“I knew you’d started the minute you began hearing Hudson’s voice. Because he didn’t talk to you when he was free to take control of you. It’s only after you started to impede that freedom that he had something to say.”

“That’s not true!” Hudson throws his hands up. “I’ve been trying to get your attention all along. You just couldn’t listen until Yoda here taught you how to make an illusion real.”

“Wait a minute.” I turn to the Bloodletter in horror. “You mean I’ll still be able to hear him, even after I wall him up?” Just the idea turns my stomach. “I thought the whole point was to get rid of him.”

“The whole point is to make sure he can’t take you over anymore. The wall will prevent that, at least for a while. But now that he’s figured out how to get your attention...” She shakes her head. “I don’t think we’ll be able to do anything about that.”

Jaxon balls his fists at this statement, but he doesn’t say a word.

I sigh. “Well, this day just got a whole lot worse, didn’t it?”

Hudson shakes his head. “You really think it’s any better for me? At least you haven’t been able to hear me for the last two days. I’ve heard every thought you’ve had, and let me tell you, they weren’t all gems. Especially the hours you spend thinking about my *dreamy* baby brother,” Hudson tells me. “Not fun. Not fun at all.”

“Then do us both a favor and get out!” I turn and yell at him, not caring that Jaxon and the Bloodletter hear me. I’m more than a little embarrassed at the idea of Hudson being privy to *all* my thoughts, especially the ones about Jaxon.

“What the everlasting bloody hell do you think I’ve been trying to do?” he answers. “You think I decided to pick a fight with an alpha werewolf just for fun? Believe me, there are better ways for me to get my kicks—even when I’m locked up with you.”

Hudson keeps talking about how miserable it is to be locked up inside me—like I don’t know that already—but I stop listening as I try to work through everything he just said about the fight with Cole.

None of it makes sense, unless— “Jaxon? What are the five things the spell says we need to get Hudson out of my body for good again?”

“Four,” Hudson snaps. “You need four things. One, two, three, four. Even a kindergartener can count that high.”

“Temper tantrums are so unbecoming,” I throw at him over my shoulder without taking my eyes off Jaxon.

“Yeah, well, so is ignorance, but that doesn’t seem to be stopping *you*.”

That gets my attention, and I turn to Hudson and smile. “Maybe I can sew up your mouth while I’m walling you away. Surely there’s a spell for that somewhere.” I keep my voice saccharin sweet.

“Yeah, because I’m totally the one with the temper here.” He rolls his eyes.

Jaxon’s gaze darts between me and roughly the direction I’ve been looking in for a few seconds before he decides to settle back on me. “The first thing we need is a vampire’s bloodstone,” he tells me. “That’s a stone that’s formed when droplets of a vampire’s blood are

put under extreme pressure. Like how a diamond is made.”

Wow. If that doesn’t give a whole new kind of horrific meaning to the term “blood diamond,” then I don’t know what does. “So there are a lot of these stones out there, just floating around?”

“That’s the thing. There aren’t that many of them at all. It’s a really difficult process to get right, so very few vampires have them. I mean, my family has several—including the ones in the king’s and queen’s crowns—but they’re very closely guarded. Which is why I’m worried about getting my hands on one to—”

“I already told you that I’ll find a way for one to come within your grasp,” the Bloodletter interjects. “We’re vampires, for God’s sake. Getting a bloodstone is the least of your problems.”

“So what’s the worst of our problems, then?” I ask, because I’d rather have the bad news first. And I’m tired of hearing everything piecemeal. For once, I’d like the whole picture up front.

“Dragon bone,” Hudson and Jaxon both say at the exact same time.

“Dragon bone?” I repeat, mind boggled. “Like a real, live dragon bone?”

“Actually, a real, *dead* dragon bone,” Hudson answers, poker-faced. “Considering most live dragons tend to be using their bones, and nobody likes a grumpy dragon.”

“Where would we find *dead* dragon bone?”

Jaxon gives me a weird look at my emphasis on the word “dead,” but he answers, “Dragon Boneyard,” at the exact same time that Hudson does—again.

“Dragon Boneyard?” I repeat. “That doesn’t sound terrifying at all.”

“You have no idea,” Hudson says. “I keep trying to figure out how we’ll navigate the boneyard. It’s going to be a disaster.”

“I don’t think I even want to know yet. One problem at a—” I freeze as something occurs to me. “Hey, wait. You really *do* know what we need to perform the spell.”

“Nothing gets by you.” Hudson gives me a fake, wide-eyed look, then growls, “No shit, Sherlock.”

“You know, you really don’t have to be so intolerable all the time,” I admonish.

“And here I thought you liked intolerable guys. You *are* dating Jaxy-Waxy, after all.”

“Your brother’s not intolerable,” I tell him, a little offended on Jaxon’s behalf.

“Says the girl who’s known him less than two weeks.”

I ignore him—not because there’s a part of me that thinks he might be right but because I don’t have time for this right now. We have things that need to get done, and they have nothing to do with my and Jaxon’s relationship.

“So we need a bone from a dead dragon and a bloodstone from the vampires,” I tell Jaxon. “We already have something from the alpha werewolf. And the athame of a powerful warlock, courtesy of Hudson, although actually, not sure why we needed that. Wasn’t the warlock thing supposed to be a stone?”

Jaxon’s eyes widen as he realizes where I’m going. “You think that’s what Hudson was doing when he...” He trails off, like even saying the word is too much.

“Body snatched me? It would seem so.”

“The spell only calls for a tooth, though,” Jaxon says. “Why all the excess blood?”

“I already told you Cole’s got an attitude problem,” Hudson answers. “And apparently a chip on his shoulder a mile wide when it comes to you, Grace.”

“Hudson says Cole freaked out and the extra blood was an accident.” I pause, unsure if this next bit sounds like I’m defending him. “Cole and I haven’t exactly had the best relationship since I got to Katmere.”

Jaxon nods. “That’s an understatement. Although did Hudson really have to nearly kill him?”

“Tomato, to-mah-to,” Hudson answers with a negligible little shrug that does nothing to hide the satisfied gleam in his eyes, one that

reminds me an awful lot of Jaxon after he, too, nearly drained Cole dry.

I wonder what Hudson—what either of them—would do if I told them that they have way more in common than they could possibly imagine.

Probably scream at the messenger, and who's got time for that? Especially when Jaxon already looks so tense that I fear he might start shaking the ground at any moment.

So instead, I content myself with saying, "You're terrible, you know that?" to Hudson before turning back to Jaxon. "So does the athame help?"

"Actually, no," Jaxon answers, a contemplative look on his face. "The fourth item is a talisman from one of the seven main covens. I'm not sure why he took the athame."

"Because at the center of the athame's hilt is a talisman—a moonstone," Hudson answers in a voice that clearly says how he thinks Jaxon is a child. "You're welcome."

"Which you're going to share the location of immediately." I don't even bother to make it a question.

"Of course, Grace." He gives me the most condescending smile in existence. "How can I resist when you ask so nicely?"

I relay what he said about the talisman to Jaxon and pretend I don't notice the way my boyfriend's eyes narrow at the in-his-face knowledge that I'm carrying on a full-blown conversation with Hudson at the same time I'm talking to him.

"The *fifth* item is near the North Pole," Jaxon continues with a deliberate sneer on his mouth as he says it—definitely rubbing in the whole "we're going to make you human and you have no say in it" thing to Hudson. Which, not going to lie, is totally well deserved after everything Hudson did.

"The North Pole? What's there? I mean, besides Santa's workshop?"

Jaxon and the Bloodletter both kind of raise eyebrows at that, so I give them a sheepish smile. "Not the right time for levity, huh?"

"I thought it was funny," Hudson says. "Besides, I bet you'd look

cute in one of those tiny little elf costumes with the bells on the toes.”

“Excuse me?” I say, not sure if he’s making fun of how short I am or if he’s implying something lascivious and inappropriate. Either way, I’m really not okay with it.

For once, Hudson is mysteriously silent. The jerk.

“The Unkillable Beast,” the Bloodletter finally answers, and there’s something in the way she says it that has me looking at her more closely. Something that has the hair on the back of my neck standing up and the rest of me trying to figure out just what feels so off about the voice she used.

But her face is impassive, her eyes placid pools of green, so I decide I must have imagined it. And focus instead on what she said and not how she said it. “Unkillable?” I repeat. “That sounds very... not good.”

“You have no idea,” the Bloodletter agrees. “But it’s the only way to break the covenant and take Hudson’s power away for good.”

I expect Hudson to protest the idea—maybe something snarky about no reason to get ourselves killed on his account when he’s quite happy keeping his power—but he doesn’t say a word. He just stares at the Bloodletter with his sharp, watchful gaze.

When I turn back to Jaxon, it’s to find him and the Bloodletter watching me expectantly. “I’m sorry, did I miss something?” I lift my brows in question.

“I asked if you wanted to try the wall thing,” Jaxon says.

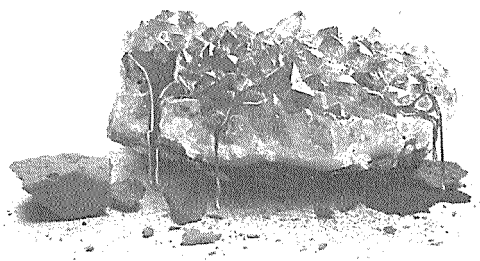
I don’t even pause to give Hudson a chance to react. “Good God, yes.”

Because a thought is starting to take form in my head that has dread pooling in my stomach. If Hudson already knew how to get out and was taking control of my body to make that happen... What was he planning on doing once he *was* out? Kill them all?

“There’s that mean streak in you again, Grace.”

It’s only after Hudson walks into the shadows and disappears that I realize he never answered my question.

37



Sweet Dreams Are Made of Anything But This

Turns out, building a mental wall isn't as hard as I thought it would be. Just placing individual bricks around a part of my mind. And the Bloodletter was right: my own defense mechanisms had gotten started all on their own, so the only thing I had to do was finish piling them higher and mortar them in place with sheer grit and determination.

Several hours later, after the Bloodletter had satisfied herself that the wall would hold, she lowers the bars and sets me free again.

I all but run out of the room and throw myself into Jaxon's arms. No offense to the Bloodletter and her ice cave, but I can't get back to school soon enough. Something about being trapped in a frozen cage and having no control over my life or my fate just does that to me. Shocking, I know.

Turns out, leaving isn't quite possible yet, though, not when Jaxon has gone to the trouble of setting out the meal Uncle Finn had insisted we pack for me.

"Thank you so much," I tell him as I all but devour the turkey sandwich and chips he's arranged on a napkin beside a thermos of water. "This might be my new favorite food in the world."

Jaxon raises one eyebrow. "And what would your old favorite food have been?"

I laugh. "I'm from San Diego. Tacos, of course."

Now that I've eaten, I can feel, maybe, a little bit more hospitable to the woman who kept me locked in a cage all night. *Maybe*. So I force myself to smile and say, "Thank you for all your help."

She waves in the general direction of the cave entrance. "It's time for you two to be leaving."

And just like that, we've been dismissed. Which is fine with me. I'm more than eager to finally say goodbye to these caves and this strange, ancient vampire who seems to have more secrets than I ever want to know.

The trip back isn't quite as exhilarating as the trip to the Bloodletter's cave—partly because we're both so tired and partly because Hudson keeps up a running commentary in my head that makes it hard to concentrate on anything Jaxon has to say. I know I'm going to have to figure out what to do about that sooner rather than later, but for now I just concentrate on keeping the peace.

Because wrangling what amounts to a shit ton of testosterone with fangs is not exactly easy.

I'm completely exhausted by the time we make it back to Katmere. Hudson seems to have fallen asleep again, thank God, and I know Jaxon wants me to come to his room for a while, but all I want is my bed and about twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep. But since we have class tomorrow, I'll settle for eight.

And Jaxon looks plenty fatigued himself, with dark circles under his eyes I'd only ever seen on him once before, when he first showed up in Uncle Finn's office. I don't know why I ever assumed Jaxon's power was infinite. Of course it isn't.

Still, he walks me to my room—of course he does—and once we get there, I go up on tiptoes and hug him as hard as I can.

The embrace startles him. Maybe because more often than not, lately, I'm backing away from him. Still, it takes only a second for him to wrap his arms around me and lift me off the ground in return.

As he does, he buries his face in my neck and just breathes me

in. I recognize the move, because I'm doing the exact same thing to him. Even after hours of fading, he smells so good—all fresh water and oranges and Jaxon.

Then, just as suddenly, he's several feet away, walking backward down the hallway while his eyes blaze with a dark fire that has my breath evaporating in my lungs. "Get some sleep," he orders, "and I'll meet you in the cafeteria tomorrow for breakfast."

I nod and force my brain to work just long enough to string two words together. "What time?"

"Text me when you get up and let me know what works for you."

I nod and turn to go inside, closing the door softly behind me.

"You're back!" Macy exclaims, bouncing off her bed. "How was it? Was the Bloodletter as scary as everyone says? Is Jaxon really not afraid of her? Did she help you get rid of Hudson? Could she—" She breaks off as she gets her first good look at me. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Oh, I don't know." She grabs on to my shoulders and turns me around to face the mirror on her closet door. "Maybe because you look like that?"

"Oh." My cheeks are flushed, my curls are wild, and dark circles ring my eyes and make me look feverish. "I'm fine. Just exhausted."

I walk over to my closet and shuck all my snow gear.

"So can I assume Hudson is gone, then?" she asks tentatively, sitting down on the edge of her bed.

"You would assume wrong," I say, collapsing on my own bed in my long underwear and turtleneck. I know I need to take a shower, but right now I have no motivation to do anything other than sit right here and pretend the last two days—and the last four months—have just been a really long nightmare that I'm about to wake up from any second.

"What do you mean?" Macy's eyes go huge. "He's still in you?"

"Ugh. Please don't ever say it like that again." I rub a hand over my very tired eyes. "But yes, Hudson is still in my head. The Bloodletter

showed me how to wall off his powers so he can't control me anymore, but he is definitely still in there."

"How do you know? If he's not taking you over—"

"Because he has a new trick. He talks to me now."

Macy looks at me like she isn't sure *how* to process that new information. "He..."

"Talks to me." I roll my eyes. "Non. Stop."

"Like, he just *talks* to you?" Macy asks, and when I nod, she continues. "I mean, what's he saying right now?"

"He's asleep right now, but I'm sure when he wakes up, he'll have something to say."

"About?"

"Anything. Everything. He's definitely a vampire with opinions. Not to mention delusions of grandeur."

Macy laughs. "That's pretty much every vampire everywhere. They aren't exactly known for their humble natures."

I think of Jaxon and Lia, Mekhi and the other members of the Order. Macy might have a point there.

"Sooooo..." Macy pauses like she doesn't want to ask the next question but someone has to. "How are *you* dealing with having someone so evil inside your head? Are you okay? I mean, I know you said he can't *do* anything in there anymore, but still..."

To be honest, I don't have the energy to go down this rabbit hole right now. And I don't know, maybe I never will. Heather's mom told me after my parents died that it was okay not to focus on the pain, not to discuss the trauma, until I was ready. So that's exactly what I plan on doing now.

The loss of control, the sheer violation on the deepest level, plus what it means to have another person in my head...much less a murderer... Well, I'm not ready to even think about any of that yet. So instead I'm going to do my best Dory impersonation and just keep swimming, just keep swimming. And—in this one instance—lie. "About like you would expect me to feel. Nauseated

but it's manageable."

"What are you going to do?"

"Besides cry and eat a boatload of Cherry Garcia ice cream?" I offer flippantly.

"I'm thinking two boatloads, but yeah. Besides that?"

I tell her about the spell and the five things we have to get to turn Hudson human again.

"So that's why Hudson made you take the athame?" she asks, astonished. "He wants out, too?"

"That's what he says. Although he was only going for the four items. He has no interest in being turned human."

She looks alarmed. "We can't let him out if he still has his powers. You know that, right?"

"Believe me, I know. I'm just not sure how long I can handle having him in my head."

"I can only imagine." She moves to my bed and sits down next to me so she can wrap an arm around my shoulders. "But don't worry. We'll get started tomorrow on figuring out how to get the last three things. And we should probably rope Flint in. I bet he'll have some ideas about how to get the dragon bone."

"I don't— You don't—" I break off, not sure how to say all the things I'm feeling right now.

"I don't what?" she asks.

"You don't have to do this with me. I mean, it sounds like at least two of the tasks are going to be really dangerous, and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Macy demands, and she looks outraged in a way I've never seen from her before. "You really think I'm going to let you do this by yourself?"

"I won't be by myself. Jaxon—"

"Jaxon won't be enough. I know he's like super powerful and all that," she says, waving her arms in a woo-woo kind of gesture. "But even he can't take on the Unkillable Beast and win—even if you *are*

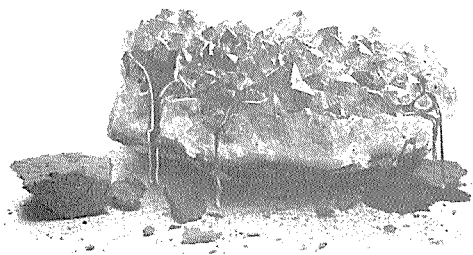
there to help him. There's a reason the thing is called 'unkillable.' I've heard stories about it since I was a child. To be honest, I didn't think it was a real thing. More like the monster your parents warn you about so you don't venture far from home. But if it's real, I've got your back in defeating it."

"Macy." There are so many things I want to say, so many things I want to tell her, but I can't get any of them out. I can't organize my thoughts, and I definitely can't squeeze them through my too-tight throat. Finally, I settle on the one thing I can say. "Thank you."

She grins. "You're welcome."

Then she reaches behind me and fluffs my pillow. "Let's both get some rest. Tomorrow sounds like it's going to be a big day."

I couldn't agree more. My eyes close the second my head hits the pillow, and just as I'm drifting off to sleep, I swear I hear Hudson say, "Sweet dreams, Grace."



Take Me Under Your Dragon Wing

“**H**ey, New Girl! Wait up!”

I roll my eyes at Flint but move to the side of the hallway to wait for him anyway. “It’s March. When are you going to stop calling me that?” I ask when he finally catches up to me.

“Never,” he answers with his usual grin. “I have a present for you...”

He waves a packet of Pop-Tarts in the air above my head, but I easily jump up and snag them. I overslept this morning and am so hungry because of it that I almost pat the familiar silver foil wrapping and whisper, *My precious*.

As we weave around the rest of the students in the crowded hallway on our way to History of Witchcraft, I quickly open the packaging and take a huge bite of the first pastry I pull out before sighing happily. Cherry. He knows me so well.

“So...evil brother in your head?” Flint asks warily. He must see the question on my face because he quickly adds, “Macy told me.”

I glance around the halls, note everyone who—per usual—is staring at me. As I do, I can’t help but wonder if Macy told the whole school. I mean, the other students have been staring at me since I first arrived at Katmere, so it’s hard to tell if I’m just the new gargoyle attraction...or the new gargoyle attraction with a healthy side of psychopath. Either way, a weight presses down on my chest,

making it hard to breathe.

“Hey, hey,” Flint says and places a strong hand on my back. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Macy just told me so you didn’t have to go through the trouble. On strictest confidence. I swear.”

The skin around his mouth is pulled tight, and I suddenly remember what Macy told me several months ago—that Flint’s brother was one of those killed in the tug-of-war between Jaxon and Hudson last year—and I feel like a total jerk. He must be as freaked out as I am that Hudson is back, and Macy figured she should warn him so he had a chance to process it in private.

“It’s okay,” I tell him as we make our way through the door to class and slide into our seats in the middle of the room. “He can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

“How sure are you about that?” Flint asks, an urgency in his voice that I’ve never heard from him before, even when he was trying to stop Lia. “You don’t know him, Grace. You can’t make blanket statements like that about someone as evil and powerful as Hudson Vega.”

He’s deliberately kept his voice low, but obviously not low enough, because several people turn to look at us in alarm when he says Hudson’s name.

“Evil and powerful, hmm?” Hudson strides into class and plops down into an empty seat on the other side of Flint, then proceeds to stretch...loudly. “I like the sound of that.”

Of course you do, I think. Which says everything about you that I need to know.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” he shoots back as he rolls his shoulders. “How long was I asleep, anyway? I feel amazing.”

I lift one brow. *That makes one of us—your snoring kept me up half the night.*

“That’s ridiculous! I do *not* snore.” He sounds so indignant that it’s all I can do not to laugh.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

“Hey, Grace. What’s going on?” Flint whispers as Dr. Veracruz

walks to the front of the classroom, her five-inch heels making a clicking sound with each step she takes. "You're just staring at an empty seat."

"Oh, sorry. I got...distracted."

Now he looks even more confused, not to mention a little annoyed. "By what?"

I sigh and decide to just break the news to him. "By Hudson. He's sitting in the seat next to you, all right?"

"He's sitting *where*?" Flint jumps out of his desk, much to my chagrin...and the amusement of most of the other students. "I don't see him."

"Of course you don't. Sit down, will you?" I hiss. When he doesn't budge, I grab his hand and pull until he finally acquiesces. "It's fine," I reiterate. "It's just a mental projection of his ghost that's currently taking up residence in my head."

Hudson interrupts. "Hey now, I'm not a ghost."

I ignore him and keep my gaze on Flint, who looks skeptical but slides back into his seat, then leans over and whispers, "How could you possibly be fine with *that* in your head?"

"Wow, Montgomery. Don't hold back," Hudson draws. "Tell me how you really feel."

Will you please shut up? I snarl at Hudson but still keep my gaze trained on Flint. "Trust me. He's been neutered. Nothing more than a Chihuahua in my head, all bark, no bite."

"Wow, thanks. I am *not* a neutered pet," Hudson says with an offended sniff.

Keep it up and I'll figure out how to actually neuter you. I turn and hold his gaze so he knows I mean it.

"There are the claws I'm so fond of." He grins at me. "You really do have a bit of the badass in you, Grace, even if you don't believe it."

Flint touches my arm to get my attention again. "How do you know?" Flint whispers as the teacher gives us the not-so-side-eye. "How can you be so sure he's not a threat?"

"Because, for now, the only power he's got is to talk me to death. Plus, I'm sure Macy told you we've got a plan to get him out of my head and make him completely human."

"It's a bad plan," Hudson interjects.

"Yes, she did, and count me in," Flint says, even as Dr. Veracruz starts making her way toward us, her heels hitting the ground like shots from a gun in the now-quiet room.

"For what?" I ask.

"For whatever plan you've got to take the fangs out of Hudson," Flint answers. "Because I am totally down for that."

"Oh, hell no." For the first time, Hudson looks totally alarmed. "No way am I putting up with Dragon Breath over there while we try to figure shit out."

I smile at Flint. "That's a really great idea. I would love your help. Thanks."

"It's a really terrible idea," Hudson grouches as he settles back in his seat with his arms crossed in front of him. He looks like a three-year-old on the verge of throwing a temper tantrum, full-on pout definitely in evidence. "Dragon Boy has a ridiculous temper."

Dr. Veracruz walks back to the front of the class and starts writing dates on the chalkboard. With Flint focused on taking notes, I turn my head just slightly toward Hudson.

That's a little stereotypical, don't you think?

"I wasn't talking about all dragons," he says with a roll of his eyes. "Just this dragon in particular." For the first time ever, Hudson looks... ashamed? "Let's just say I know the family."

"Miss Foster!" I jerk to attention as Dr. Veracruz all but shouts my name.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Are you planning on answering my question or are you going to spend the whole class period staring at an empty seat?"

"I wasn't—" I break off as my cheeks flood with heat, because what am I going to say? That I wasn't actually staring at an empty seat, I

was just arguing with a voice in my head?

Yeah, because that sounds like a totally rational argument...not to mention a one-way ticket to social suicide.

"I'm not just a voice in your head!" Hudson snaps indignantly.

"Yes, Miss Foster?" Dr. Veracruz's voice slices like a guillotine. "What exactly is it that you weren't doing? Besides not paying attention in my class?"

"I'm sorry," I tell her, giving up because there's no reasonable explanation I can put forth. And because the sooner I humble myself, hopefully the sooner she'll go back to the front of the class and leave me alone. "I won't let it happen again."

For long seconds, she just stares at me. Then, just when I think she's going to turn away and head back to the front of the classroom, she says, "Since you seem so eager to make up for your lackadaisical attitude so far in this class, why don't you explain to us about the true enemies of witches during the Salem Witch Trials."

"The true enemies of witches?" I ask faintly, because I have absolutely no idea how to answer that question. Everything I was ever taught in school told me that there were no real witches in Salem. Then again, everything in my old life told me witches don't exist. So maybe she has a point.

"Um, witches during the Salem Witch Trials..." I mumble, hoping for divine inspiration before I make an even bigger fool of myself in front of the class. Unfortunately, nothing is coming.

At least not until Hudson says, "Tell her the real culprits of the Salem Witch Trials weren't the Puritans."

What do you mean? Of course they were.

"No, they weren't. The Witch Trials were a power play by vampires, plain and simple, and the people who died there were pawns in a petty battle that a lot of people hoped would spawn the Third Great War—including my father. But they were wrong."

Salem WTF Trials



My mind is blown, completely blown, by this alternate version of history that Hudson provides. Part of me thinks it's total BS, but with Dr. Veracruz standing right in front of me looking like she plans to turn me into something slimy if I don't answer her soon, I decide to just go for it.

I repeat what Hudson explained to me—minus the whole “my father” reference—and one look at her stunned face tells me everything I need to know. Namely that Hudson didn't lie *and* that Dr. Veracruz didn't expect me to know anything about the trials.

The rest of class passes in a blur, largely because Hudson is in a very talkative mood this morning. And since I'm the only person who can hear him, I'm the lucky one who gets to hear all the things about all the things. Lucky, lucky me.

I pack up quickly when the bell rings, determined to get to my Physics of Flight class on time. It turns out Flint is in the advanced class right across from mine, so we end up walking together. Something that, for no reason I can ascertain, makes Hudson cranky as hell.

“Do we really have to spend all day talking to Dragon Boy?” he complains. “What could you two possibly have in common?”

“Oh, I don't know. How about the fact that we both despise you?”

I fire back, not caring that Flint has an amused expression on his face as he watches me chew out the air next to him.

“Believe me, that’s not exactly an exclusive club,” Hudson answers with a snort.

I roll my eyes. “Which should tell you something about your people skills.”

“All it tells me is that people are even more small-minded than I imagined.”

“Small-minded?” I ask incredulously. “Because they didn’t go along with your little ‘conquer the world’ plan? How shortsighted of them.”

Flint barks out a laugh but doesn’t seem to mind that he’s only privy to my side of this ridiculous argument.

“Hey, the world could do a lot worse than to be ruled by me,” he says. “Look around.”

“Wow. Arrogant much?” I ask.

“It’s only arrogant if it’s not true,” he answers and nods toward the stairs that lead to Jaxon’s tower.

I don’t have a clue how to respond to that, so I don’t. Instead, I turn to Flint and ask, “What’s this class about anyway? I mean, is it just the science behind flying or do we learn how to fly? How scared should I be?”

“Most of us learn how to fly long before we get to Katmere,” Flint explains. “So this class deals more with the why than the how of flight. They call it a physics class, but there’s a lot of biology, too, because we learn about the structure and makeup of different wings. And we even dissect a few.”

“You mean they aren’t all the same?” I ask, a little surprised by the idea that wings are so different at the core. I guess I thought it was like anything else—hair, eyes, skin. They’re available in different colors, but when it comes down to important things, they’re the same. They’re all made up of the same biological matter and they all function the same way. The idea that wings aren’t like that is

surprisingly fascinating.

Then again, judging by the look on Flint's face, he's even more surprised that I assumed they are. "Of course they're different," he says. "Dragon wings have to support a creature that weighs thousands of pounds. Pixie wings support creatures who can fit in the palm of your hand. And it's not just about size—we fly completely differently, too."

"What do you mean? Isn't flying flying?"

"Not even a little bit. Pixies can hover over whatever they want for long periods of time. Dragons' wings are built for speed and distance, while pixies' wings are built for easy maneuverability. Because pixies are so much smaller and slower—even though their wings flap faster—they can change direction on a dime, while it takes us time to slow down enough to bank hard left or right."

"So," I say as we turn down a fairly empty hallway. "I have a question."

"Will I help you learn to fly? Of course I will. It'll be so much fun." Flint grins. "Plus, we still have those pictures for Mr. Damasen to finish."

"Oh, right. I'm sorry; I totally blanked on that." I roll my eyes at myself. "Too much going on in my head, I guess. Maybe we can do it this weekend?"

"Yeah, sure. Just let me know what works for you."

"Great, thanks. And I'm sure I'll want to take you up on the flying lessons." I mean, I still can't believe that I can *fly*. Me. Under my own power. Because I'm a gargoyle, I mean. When the whole "I have wings" thing came up earlier, the implication of being able to fly was there. But to think about it, to imagine Flint giving me lessons on how not to die while doing it... It's more than a little overwhelming.

Instead, I focus on something else. Giving the idea time to settle can't be a bad thing.

"But speaking of flying, I actually had a different question," I say to Flint.

He turns amused eyes my way. "Yes?"

"You mentioned pixies. How many other species are out there? Are there a lot of other creatures that aren't at Katmere, ones that I don't even know exist?"

"Definitely." He grins. "More than you could ever imagine."

"Oh." I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with that.

My surprise must show, because Flint lifts a brow at me. "Was that not the answer you were looking for?"

"I don't know—I just... What other kinds of creatures are there? And why aren't they at Katmere?"

"Because Katmere's teachers specialize in dragons, werewolves, vampires, and witches," Flint tells me. "There are other schools out there that specialize in other magical creatures."

There goes my mind, blowing up all over again. "Like...?"

"Like in Hawaii, there's a school that specializes in water shifters."

"Water shifters?" I repeat.

"Yes," Flint answers with a laugh. He must know what I'm thinking, because he adds, "Mermaids are real. So are selkies and nereids and sirens, among other things."

"Seriously?" I ask.

"Seriously." He shakes his head in obvious amusement. "You look dazzled."

"I feel dazzled."

"Vegas has Ceralean," Hudson adds from near my head. "It's a school for succubi, among others."

Out of all the mythological creatures, that's what you come at me with? I give an exaggerated eye roll. *A creature known for its sexual appetites?*

"Hey, I was just adding to your knowledge base." The look he gives me is so innocent that I'm amazed he doesn't have a halo sparkling... right around his feet. "You're the one who asked."

I don't even bother to say anything this time. I just roll my eyes again...at least until I realize Flint is staring at me like he suddenly

thinks something is really wrong with me. I'm proven right when he asks, "Umm, do you have something in your eye?"

"Yeah, I just got some dirt in there or something." I rub my eye. "All better."

"Really? Dirt in your eye?" Hudson makes a disgusted noise. "Nice to know where I stand."

Somewhere below an eyelash and above pink eye.

He cracks up, and the sound of it nearly stops me in my tracks. For a guy who's such a jerk, he's got a surprisingly nice laugh.

Flint and I turn one more corner, and I'm so busy arguing with Hudson in my head that I don't realize Jaxon is waiting by my classroom door until I almost run into him.

"You okay?" he asks at the same time Flint says, "Whoa."

"I'm fine," I tell them both a little heatedly, annoyed at the way they keep frowning at me in concern. They should try balancing multiple conversations at the same time—especially when one is in their head, where no one else can hear it or keep up.

"Let's be real," Hudson says. "It's not like either of them would be able to keep up even if they could hear. The two of them are more brawn than brain, if you ask me."

It's so blatantly untrue that I don't even bother to get offended. Instead, I poke him back because I can...and because riling him up is too much fun not to at least try. *You're just jealous because you don't have any brawn at the moment.*

"Yeah, *that's* what I'm jealous of."

There's something fleeting in his tone that gives me pause, but it's gone so fast that I don't have a chance to figure out what it is.

Plus, Flint chooses just then to say, "I've got to get to class. But hit me up about those flying lessons soon. You're going to need them for Ludares."

I wave at Flint, then lean forward and slide my arms around Jaxon's waist and smile up at him as he does the same. "Sorry I missed out on seeing you at breakfast this morning. I was so tired, I didn't

wake up until fifteen minutes before class started.”

He smiles back. “That’s actually why I stopped by. I thought you might want to meet me at the library after art. I have to make up a midterm from yesterday during lunch today, but I thought we could spend some time tonight researching how to kill the Unkillable Beast.”

“Awww, how cute. Little Jaxy-Waxy wants a study date.” Hudson sneers.

“Are you serious right now?” I demand. “Leave your brother alone.”

Jaxon looks over his shoulder at the empty hallway I’m currently yelling at and then raises an eyebrow at me.

I shrug and just say, “Hudson.”

Jaxon’s eyes narrow, but he nods. What else can he do?

Hudson leans against the stone wall, next to another huge tapestry depicting an army of dragons in massive metal armor soaring over a small village. It’s terrifying and exhilarating at the same time, and I make a mental note to look at it more closely after class.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Hudson says as he readjusts, crossing his arms and resting the bottom of his foot against the wall. “Why don’t you leave my brother alone for a little while? Watching the two of you make goo-goo eyes at each other is nauseating.”

“Give me a break. Pretty sure you need a body to be nauseated.”

Hudson shrugs. “I guess that just goes to show how disgusting the two of you really are.”

Refusing to be drawn in to yet another argument with Hudson, I refocus on Jaxon, only to find him staring at me with a frown on his face. “Sorry,” I tell him sheepishly. “Your brother has a big mouth.”

“That’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one,” Jaxon agrees with a nod of his head.

A random thought occurs to me. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you... Why does Hudson have a British accent but you don’t?”

Jaxon shrugs. “Our parents are British.”

I wait for him to say more, but he doesn't. Which says everything, I suppose. What must that feel like, to have had so little to do with your parents that you don't even have the same accent? I can't imagine, and it breaks my heart for him all over again.

"Of course. We should all feel bad for the boy not raised by the two most vain people on the planet," Hudson snarks.

I ignore him, then change the subject with Jaxon. "I would love to meet you in the library after I'm done in the art room. Does six o'clock work?"

He nods. "Sounds perfect." But when he leans down to kiss me, Hudson makes such an obnoxious gagging sound that there's no way I can actually go through with it.

I duck my head and Jaxon sighs, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he presses a kiss to the top of my head and says, "I'll see you then."

"Okay."

I watch him go, but the second he makes it around the corner, I turn on Hudson. "Seriously? Was the gagging really necessary?"

He resorts to the British stiff upper lip. "You have no idea how necessary."

"You do realize that you are completely ridiculous, don't you?"

Hudson looks like he doesn't know what to say about that—or even how to feel about it. Half offended, half amused, all intrigued—it's an interesting look on him, even before he says, "Well, that's a new one. No one's ever called me *that* before."

"Maybe because they've never actually met you."

I expect a snappy comeback, but instead there's a contemplative silence for several seconds. Eventually, though, he murmurs, "Perhaps you're right."

I don't know what to say after that, and I think maybe he doesn't, either, because silence stretches between us—the longest silence there's ever been, in fact, when one of us isn't sleeping.

I do an about-face and head into class, leaving Hudson still

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crush

leaning against the wall.

Something tells me the Physics of Flight isn't exactly going to be the class I excel in, so I find a seat at the back of the classroom. I wait for Hudson to join me, but he actually does what I asked for once and leaves me alone.

Too bad.

Survival Is So Last Year



“**Y**ou should absolutely compete.” Class is nearly over, so I’m shocked when I hear Hudson’s voice next to me. “Thanks for saving me a seat, by the way.”

I’m sitting in the back of the room because the last thing I want is to draw attention to myself in a class I’m two months behind in—and definitely not because there are empty seats on both sides of me.

“Compete in what?” I mutter to him under my breath, but I’m not really paying attention to his answer. I’m too busy trying to scribble down notes that might as well be another language.

“Ludares. Although, it’s really just an excuse for everyone to try to kill one another doing really dangerous stuff.” He does a quick, “people are weird” eyebrow lift. “Most popular day of the year here at Katmere. Especially among the shifters.”

“Well, of course. I mean, when you put it like that, who wouldn’t want to take part in it? I mean, survival is so last decade.”

He laughs. “Exactly.”

I try to get back into Mr. Marquez’s lecture, but by now I’ve lost even the faint thread of what’s going on, so I decide to just snap a few pics of the lecture notes instead of actually trying to decipher them. If I can’t figure them out on my own later, I’ll ask Flint for help.

“Or you could ask me?” Hudson says a little sardonically. “I may

be a”—he moves his fingers in the universal symbol for air quotes—
“‘psychopath,’ but I’m a psychopath who got a ninety-eight in this
class.”

“You took this class? Why?” A thought occurs to me. “Can you
fly like Jaxon?”

“You make him sound like Superman.” Hudson rolls his eyes. “He
can’t actually fly.”

“You get what I mean.” I wave a hand. “Whenever he does...
whatever it is he does. If you don’t call it flying, what do you call it?”

“He’s got telekinesis. He floats. You know, like a blimp.”

That startles a laugh out of me. I mean, the description is awful,
but it’s also kind of hilarious imagining Jaxon just floating around
the top of sports stadiums like the Goodyear Blimp.

“It’s a good picture, isn’t it?” Hudson smiles slyly.

“It’s an absurd picture and you know it. Your brother is *amazing*.”

“So you keep telling me.”

The bell rings, and I pause our conversation long enough to
pack up my things and make my way into the hall. It’s lunchtime,
and normally I’d try to find Macy, but the thought of going into the
cafeteria right now is too much for me.

Everyone staring at me. Judging me. And finding me wanting.
At this rate, I’m probably going to have to repeat my senior year,
too.

The whole thing sucks. It just sucks. And I think about getting
it over with. Just walking into the cafeteria, standing on a table, and
announcing to everyone that I’m responsible for Hudson being back.
Oh, and by the way, the rumors are true. I totally make a kick-ass
statue.

It would probably be better to just get it over with quickly, kind of
like ripping off a Band-Aid. But I’m so tired right now and everything
that’s happened is pressing down on me, making me feel like I might
crumble at any second.

I hesitate in the hallway, my gaze meeting Hudson’s, and it seems

like he doesn't know what I should do, either. His uncertainty has me wobbling on my feet before I shake it off and turn in the other direction.

I grab a pack of peanut butter crackers out of the nearest vending machine and head out to the art studio to get to work on my painting that I'm behind on now. Hopefully, a few extra hours down there will help me kick my funk mood, too.

The rest of the afternoon goes by pretty uneventfully, as long as you count Hudson talking nonstop uneventful. He's got an opinion on everything—even things no normal person should have an opinion on.

He thinks the art teacher looks like a flamingo in her hot-pink dress. And while he's not wrong, it's hard to focus on what she's saying with that picture in my head now.

He's convinced T. S. Eliot shouldn't be included in British Literature because he was born in Missouri—I get an hour-long diatribe about that particular offense.

And right now...right now he's arguing about the way that I mix black paint.

"I'm in your head so I know you're not blind, Grace. How can you possibly think that's an attractive shade of black?"

I stare at the color in question and then mix just the barest hint of blue into it. Partly because I want to and partly because I know it will upset Hudson even more. And after the last four hours, I'm all about pissing him off any way I can. Payback's a bitch like that.

"It's subtle and I like that." I dab a little on my canvas, and it's still not quite where I want it, so I go back and add just a touch more of midnight blue.

Hudson throws his hands into the air. "I give up. You're impossible."

Thankfully, I'm the only student left in the art room, so I don't have to worry about other people thinking I'm talking to the stool next to me. "*I'm impossible?* You're the one throwing a hissy fit

about my painting.”

“I am not throwing a *hissy fit*.” I can tell he’s offended—all the crisp British syllables are back in his voice, even as he stretches his legs out in front of him. “I am merely trying to provide some artistic feedback based on my long history of art appreciation—”

“Oh, here we go again.” I roll my eyes. “If you bring up the fact that you’re old one more time—”

“I am not old! I’m *older*. Vampires are immortal, in case you’ve forgotten, so you can’t judge our age the same way you judge human age.”

“Sounds to me a lot like a justification for getting around the fact that you’re old as dirt.” I know that I’m poking a caged bear, know that he’s going to end up taking my head off if I keep needling him, but I can’t help it. He totally deserves it after everything he’s done to annoy me.

From the beginning, he’s had the upper hand during most of our arguments, and now that I’ve found something that bugs him, I can’t help rubbing it in a little. That probably makes me a terrible person, but I’ve had a psychopath inside my head for nearly four months, so I figure I can’t totally be to blame for this new mean streak of mine.

“You know what? Do whatever you want with the black. The fact that it’s dull and is going to ruin your painting is your problem—”

“I’m sorry, could you say that a little louder, please?” I put a hand to my ear in the universal “I can’t hear you” gesture.

“I said it’s dull.”

“No, not that part. The part about it being my painting. Mine. Can you say that again?”

“Whatever,” he huffs. “I was just trying to help.”

“Yeah, I know. What is it about guys that always makes them want to help—even when no one is asking for it?”

“Do what you want,” he answers, and when he doesn’t say anything else, I think maybe I’ve gone too far. But when I sneak a quick peek

at his face, I realize he's working almost as hard as I am not to grin. Which is absurd, I know. I want him out of my head more than anything, but I have to admit that now that he can't take control of my body anymore, arguing with him is a ridiculous amount of fun.

With that thought in mind, I grab the darkest red I can find and mix a glob of it into my black. And then wait for the explosion.

It takes about five seconds, which is four seconds longer than I expected, but then Hudson all but screeches, "Are you kidding me with this? Are you trying to blind me?" and I know I've scored a direct hit. Another point for me.

Sure, the tally currently looks something like this: Grace 7, Hudson 7 million, but I'll take the win.

At least until I remember that I've got something to ask him.

"Oh, hey. I've been meaning to ask. Now that we're actually working on the spell to get you out of my head... Where did you put the werewolf canine and the athame?"

"Top shelf in your closet. In a bag, far right."

"Up there? Why would you hide them there?"

"Because I didn't want you to find them somewhere and totally freak out before you knew where they came from."

"Good call," I admit grudgingly.

I keep painting, ignoring Hudson's objections. I'm still not sure what I'm painting yet, but I know that there's a compulsion inside me to get it on canvas. Part of me wonders if it's a memory from those four months I was trapped in gargoyle form, if it's something important that I don't remember. But another part of me figures that's just wishful thinking. That I'm so desperate to regain that piece of my life that I'm seeing portents of good things, even if they don't actually exist.

Delusional much, Grace? Why, yes, I am. I step back and look at what I've done so far.

The background is complete, and looking at it feels strange because it's unfamiliar but also good—because something deep down inside me is whispering that I've gotten it just right.

And to be clear, that something isn't Hudson. It's deeper, more primal, and I keep hoping if I paint enough, it will unlock everything else.

I'm cleaning the black off my brush, thinking about what comes next, when a text hits my phone. My hands are covered in paint and I almost don't get it, but I change my mind at the last second.

And then gasp when I see the text is from Jaxon—and that I'm nearly an hour and a half late for our date.

Turns Out the Devil Wears Armani



Unfortunately, there's a whole a string of texts from Jaxon—several from six thirty, one from seven o'clock, and then three that just came in.

Jaxon: Running late? I've got a table set up at the back of the library, near the study rooms

Jaxon: Why are vampires like wizards?

Jaxon: Because they're neck-romancers

Jaxon: Sorry, I couldn't resist

Jaxon: You okay? Did you fall asleep?

Jaxon: Hey, I'm not sure if you fell asleep or if you're painting, but I've found some interesting stuff

Jaxon: Can you text me when you get the chance, just so I know you're okay?

Jaxon: Miss you

I feel awful. I can't believe I forgot to meet him. I was looking forward to seeing him all day, and then I got so wrapped up in my painting that it totally slipped my mind. I tell myself it's because my brain is on overload and the last thing I want to do is spend a bunch of time trying to figure out how to take on the Unkillable Beast and how not to die. To be fair, it's a valid argument, but that doesn't mean I feel any less shitty about not showing up.

“I’m sure baby brother will survive being stood up,” Hudson tells me, and there’s an edge to his voice that wasn’t there just a few minutes ago. “You should keep painting. You’re really on a roll.”

“Despite the fact that I used the wrong black?” I answer, barely paying attention as I fire off a text to Jaxon, apologizing and telling him that I’m coming.

“Sorry to be so particular, but Armani black is a very specific color.” He looks like he swallowed a lemon and it would be funny if I wasn’t in such a hurry.

I shove my phone in my backpack and start cleaning up as fast as I can. Which isn’t nearly fast enough, considering how big of a mess I’ve made mixing paint. “Who said I was even thinking about Armani black?”

“Sorry. I just...” For the first time since I first saw him, he looks totally discombobulated. Like he’s said too much but also not enough. I almost ask him what’s wrong, but then I remind myself that we’re not friends. That he’s just a guy squatting in my brain for a while, and he’s not even a very nice one. I don’t actually owe him anything.

I speed up my cleaning, determined to get to the library before Jaxon totally gives up on me. I expect Hudson to snark the entire time—it *is* his favorite pastime, after all—but he’s strangely silent after the Armani comment. Which I’m grateful for, because it lets me focus entirely on getting the supplies put away.

I’m just about done when the door to the art room flies open on a gust of wind. Cold air fills the room, and I whirl around, wondering what new threat I’m facing—only to find Jaxon standing there, watching me with a small smile and unfathomable eyes.

“I’m so sorry!” I tell him, rushing forward to greet him as he slams the door closed behind him. “I totally got carried away with my painting and I lost track of time. I didn’t mean to—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” He looks me up and down, his smile growing as he takes in my paint-covered artist’s smock. “I like this look.”

I give him the same kind of once-over he just gave me, taking in the frayed jeans and the black designer T-shirt. “The feeling is definitely mutual.”

“Oh yeah?” He wraps me in his arms, and I feel a warmth deep inside me—sexy and comforting and exciting all at the same time. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“You smell good,” I tell him, burying my nose in the bend between his neck and his shoulder for several long seconds. And he does, fresh and bright and so, so amazing.

“Yeah, well, I can say that feeling is mutual, too.” He scrapes a fang across the sensitive skin beneath my ear. “Very, very mutual.”

“Tell me you’re not serious,” Hudson says with a yawn. “Tell me this isn’t the pinnacle of your scintillating conversations.”

Why don’t you take a nap or something, I hiss at him even as I pull away from Jaxon.

“You ready to go?” Jaxon asks.

“Yeah, just give me a minute to get the rest of the supplies put up.” I take off my apron and store it in my cubicle, then finish putting the bottles of paint back in the cabinet.

Five minutes later, we’re walking through the tunnels—tunnels that seem nowhere near as frightening when Jaxon is by my side, talking about what he’s found in his hour-and-a-half search through the library’s magical databases.

“I’ve spent most of tonight trying to identify what the Unkillable Beast is,” he tells me as we make it to the rotunda with the huge bone chandelier hanging from the ceiling. “There are so many different versions throughout the last several hundred years, almost like it’s more fairy tale than real monster, that it’s hard to get a read on what we’ll be facing if we go up there. Except for the fact that almost no one makes it back alive—and those who do can’t agree on what they’ve seen.”

“Is there anything similar in the different accounts?” I ask, focusing on the conversation and not on the fact that I’m about to

pass the tunnel where Hudson's ex-girlfriend tried to murder Jaxon and me. "I mean, besides the 'everyone gets dead' thing?"

I think about asking Hudson what he remembers about that night—if anything—but decide it doesn't matter. Besides, what if he wants to take a field trip to the scene of his reincarnation? Show-and-tell isn't really my thing, especially not down here.

"I don't remember anything," Hudson tells me quietly as he strides alongside us, one hand casually sliding along the stoned and jeweled walls. He's a few inches ahead, so I can't really see his face. "I didn't put her up to it, if that's what you're thinking."

I'm not thinking anything, I answer, though that's not quite the truth. It's hard not to be afraid of Hudson when I'm down here, harder still not to be angry with him. Maybe what happened wasn't his fault, but it's hard to imagine that he and his persuasive power didn't have some small role to play in the fact that Lia was obsessed with bringing him back.

"The stories do have a few things in common," Jaxon answers, his arm tightening around me as if he senses my disquiet.

Which only makes me feel worse about being such a baby, so I swallow the lingering fear. I shove it down deep inside me and concentrate instead on something I do have the power to change. "Like what? Have you figured out exactly how to find it yet?"

I remember him saying in the caves that the Beast is somewhere near the North Pole. Though I don't see why he couldn't have a nice summer home somewhere in Greece or Egypt, L.A. or Miami? Anywhere that has warm weather and a beach would be good with me right now, because after that trip to the Bloodletter's, I am ready to get away from the snow for a while.

"That's actually the one thing every account agrees on," Jaxon tells me. "The Unkillable Beast lives somewhere near the Arctic Circle. Seems everyone is happy to share approximately where to find it—just so you can plan a trip avoiding it at all costs."

"I'm with them," I tell him, making a face. "Taking on the North

Pole sounds hellish enough without also taking on a monster that can't be killed. Are we sure it doesn't spend March in Tahiti?"

Jaxon looks confused at first, but then he gets it. "I'm sorry. When this is all done and we've graduated from Katmere, I'll take you someplace warm and sunny, I promise."

"I'm going to hold you to that promise," I tell him. "I cannot spend every day for the rest of my life in freaking Alaska."

"Nothing says we have to live in Alaska after graduation. I know you were planning on doing the college thing before your parents died and you ended up here. We can still do that if you want."

"I don't know what I want, to be honest." It sounds bad when I say it like that, especially considering I'm only three months from graduation. But the plan I had before my parents died seems like it belonged to a whole different person.

"What do you want to do?" I ask Jaxon, because I figure any plan I have for the future is going to include my mate.

"I don't know that I really had a plan for after graduation, to be honest. When you're immortal, you've got a lot more time to think things through."

"Especially if you're a prince and have already been alive a couple of centuries." I make a mental note to ask him later about the whole "vampire aging" thing. I mean, I know he's centuries old, but I also know he's only about eighteen in human years. I sincerely hope I'm not dating someone who was in diapers and sucked his thumb for a hundred years.

Hudson snort-laughes, so I know he heard that last thought, but he doesn't turn around. I can't help a smile spreading across my face at the image of a twenty-year-old *Hudson* in said diapers.

This finally gets his attention, and he shoots me a raised eyebrow over one shoulder. "Very kinky, Miss Foster."

My face turns beet red, but Jaxon doesn't seem to notice.

"I'm not sure what my plans are, but we have the rest of our lives to sort it out," Jaxon finally replies and squeezes my shoulder.

We make it out of the tunnels and through the creepy dungeon area, and I feel myself relax the second the cell door clangs closed behind us.

“What else did you learn about this monster?” I ask as we make our way toward the staircase that leads to the library. We pass through the lounge on the main floor, and while a few people turn to stare, it’s a lot less than it was a couple of days ago.

Maybe they really are getting used to having a human/gargoyle around. Now, if I could just get used to the gargoyle portion of that equation myself, I’m pretty sure everything would get a lot easier.

“It’s big. Like, beyond-measure huge. Twenty, thirty stories, some say. And it’s very, very old.”

“Well, that sounds encouraging,” I say, tongue firmly in cheek. “I mean, who doesn’t want to fight a monster who’s been around forever and is the size of a mountain?”

“Right? Although I don’t think it’s quite that big. More like the side of a mountain.”

“Well, that makes it so much better,” I tease as we finally make it to the library. But as Jaxon reaches for the door handle, I realize it’s almost completely dark inside. “Oh no! Did Amka close while you came to get me? I’m so sorry—”

“Relax,” he says with a grin, bending down to drop a quick kiss on my lips. “I’ve got it covered.”

Hudson steps aside as Jaxon opens the door and gestures for me to precede him. But I’m only a few steps into the library’s main room before I realize that I’ve messed up a lot more than an evening study date. I’ve messed up a *date* date, because sitting in the center of the room is a small, round table covered with a tablecloth, candles, and one of the most gorgeous bouquets of flowers I have ever seen.

“Well, well, well,” Hudson says, sauntering into the room, his hands shoved into his front pockets. “Isn’t this cozy? Tell Jaxon I’m overwhelmed, but he really shouldn’t have.”

Ben & Jerry Are the Only Two Guys I Want to Fight Over



“Oh, Jaxon. You didn’t have to do this.” I walk toward the table, feeling more than a little bit fluttery as I take in the candles and the sparkling water on ice and the *flowers*. The really beautiful flowers. “They’re gorgeous.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

“I love them,” I correct him, burying my face in the white, lavender, and purple blooms. “They smell amazing.” I hold them out to him.

“I smelled them when I picked them out,” he says. “And it’s not that big a deal.”

I melt all over at his words, because it’s a huge deal for so many reasons.

One, he went through the trouble of organizing a dinner like this for me because he thought I would like it.

Two, he went through the trouble of finding flowers in the middle of Alaska and picked them out himself.

Three, he did this even though ours is the first real relationship he’s ever had—the first time he’s allowed himself to feel in more than a hundred years. How could I not fall for Jaxon when he reminds me, over and over again, just what good care he will take of me?

“They’re flowers, not a trip to Paris,” Hudson says as he grabs a book off the circulation desk and thumbs through the pages. There’s

such annoyance in his movements that I totally ignore him. The night is young. There's more than enough time for him to rain on my parade before I have to go back to my room.

"It's a huge deal," I answer them both, wrapping my arms around Jaxon's waist and squeezing him tightly. "And I'm so sorry I forgot. I feel awful."

"Don't." He gives me a soft smile as he brushes a curl back from my face. "You've had a rough few days. And there's a microwave next to Amka's desk. Your dinner is easy to reheat if we need to."

"What did you get me?" I ask, my suddenly growling stomach a reminder that I've had very little to eat today.

Jaxon laughs at the rumble. "Come on, let's get you seated and you can find out."

He escorts me to the table, and I realize he's done more than just candles and flowers. He's gotten me street tacos in the middle of Alaska that look just like the ones from my favorite taqueria in San Diego. "How did you do this?"

"I can't tell you all my secrets," he answers with a grin.

"Yeah, but you definitely have to tell me *this* secret." I pick one up and take a bite, relishing the way the familiar flavor explodes in my mouth. "I'm going to have to get these again soon." I take another bite, so excited about this little taste of home that I'm not even pretending to have any restraint.

"Or you could keep me around, and I could get them for you anytime you want," Jaxon suggests as he settles down next to me.

"Yeah, I could totally do that." We grin into each other's eyes for long seconds, my breath catching in my chest for all the right reasons this time—at least until Hudson walks over and interrupts with a disbelieving laugh.

"Meat? My brother got you meat as a gift?" He snorts as soon as Jaxon gets up to turn on some music.

I glare at Hudson and whisper-shout, "They're not meat. They're tacos. And—"

“Which are made up of meat, am I correct?” He starts circling the table like an attorney hell-bent on cross-examination. He even looks the part in his flawless dress shirt and dress pants.

“Okay, yes. But there’s nothing wrong with that. I love tacos.” I deliberately turn away from Hudson and back to Jaxon, who is fiddling with his iPhone.

“And I love human blood. Doesn’t mean I want it as a present.” Hudson comes close now, bracing his hands on the back of my chair and leaning down so that he’s all but whispering in my ear when he continues. “But it’s good that you have such low expectations. You’re going to need them with Jaxy-Waxy.”

“Will you stop calling him that?” It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to whirl around and shout at him—but apparently that’s exactly what he wants, so I refuse to bite. Instead, I swallow back the string of sharp retorts I want to throw at him and focus as much attention as I can muster on Jaxon instead.

He finally settles on Savage Garden’s “I Knew I Loved You,” and my heart stutters in my chest, even before he turns and gives me a look that makes me feel all kinds of delicious things.

The look in his eyes tells me he knows exactly what I’m feeling... and he likes it. A lot.

“You’re going to have to tell me where you got these,” I say to Jaxon when he makes it back to the table. I take another bite of the taco Hudson is working overtime trying to ruin for me. After I’ve swallowed, I continue. “I’m going to need them again, like, tomorrow.”

“I could probably arrange that.”

“Oh, really?” I lift my brows questioningly.

He shakes his head in response, obviously amused. “Grace, there isn’t much I wouldn’t do to make you happy. I can’t give you Tahiti for a few more months, but I can absolutely get you tacos every day, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t need tacos.” I reach for his hand and squeeze it tightly. “I just need you.”

"I need you, too," he answers before nodding at me to keep eating.

It's as I pick up my second taco that he switches the subject. "Tell me about the art project you're working on. I'm dying to get a look at it."

"Yeah, me too," I tell him with a little snort.

He looks intrigued. "What does that mean?"

"It means I have no idea what I'm working on. Usually I know exactly what I'm going to paint, but this time I'm just painting like my life depends on it, but I don't know what it is I'm painting. Weird, right?"

"Genius is weird," Jaxon answers with a shrug. "Everyone knows that. I say keep embracing it, see what happens."

"That's what I figure, too. The worst thing that can happen is it's trash, so where's the harm?"

"It's not trash," he tells me.

"How do you know?"

"Because I know you."

It's such a simple answer, but it has me swooning a little anyway, because it's just what I need to hear right now.

"You're entirely too charming," I tell him with a soft smile. "You know that, right?"

Jaxon just grins and leans in for a kiss before sitting back down, and Hudson gags. Again. And I can't stop myself from turning to glare at him.

"Hey, is Hudson still talking to you?" Jaxon asks, and he doesn't sound happy.

"He's always talking to me," I look at Jaxon and complain with a roll of my eyes. "I swear, he never shuts up."

"You know, that mean streak of yours is getting a lot wider recently," Hudson grumps.

"It's because you're rubbing off on me," I shoot back. But the second the words are out, I can feel myself blush scarlet. "I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant," Hudson interjects, but the grumpiness is gone, replaced by a slyness in his dark-blue eyes that makes me distinctly nervous, though I'm not sure why.

"My brother sure knows how to ruin a mood," Jaxon mutters as he gets up to clear my dinner away.

"Thank you," Hudson answers. "I do what I can."

"Could you please just shut up for five minutes?" I demand as I stand to follow Jaxon.

"Now, where's the fun in that?" Hudson walks across the library and climbs on top of one of the shorter bookshelves, dangling his feet down the side as he picks up the mini gargoyle Amka has sitting on top of it and loosely wraps his arms around the statue. "Besides, if I'm quiet, who's going to point out the error of your ways?"

"Wow, condescending much?" I stick my tongue out at Hudson, who pretends to catch it like I blew him a kiss and dramatically holds it up to his heart before I can turn away.

"I'm sorry," I say as I catch up to Jaxon and wrap my arms around his waist from behind. "I know you wanted tonight to be special, and Hudson keeps messing it up."

"Don't worry about it," he answers, turning around so he can hold me, too. "It's not your fault."

"It feels like my fault." I squeeze him more tightly.

"Well, it's not." He leans down a little, brushes a kiss over my temple. "But since our date isn't exactly turning out as planned, why don't we at least do something useful with the time?"

"Like what?"

"Like find out more about gargoyles? I know you were trying to do that before everything went wrong with Hudson the other day."

"Nothing went wrong with me," Hudson growls at him. "I was trying to help her."

"That sounds amazing," I reply to Jaxon, and he gestures for me to sit back at the table while he fetches the books from the back table where Amka left them for me.

I turn to glare at Hudson. “Because body snatching is so helpful?”

“Are you back to being mad at me about that again?” He sighs.

“Even now that you know why I had to get the athame?”

“I’m never not going to be mad at you about that,” I shoot back.

“It figures. I was trying to help, and this is what I get.”

“Trying to help?” I make a disbelieving noise in the back of my throat. “Trying to help *yourself*, don’t you mean?”

“Are you ever going to get tired of making me the bad guy?” he asks softly.

“I don’t know. Are you ever going to get tired of *being* the bad guy?” I answer.

In the middle of all this, Jaxon walks back to the table and deposits three books I remember from the pile set aside for me. My fingers are itching to read them, and I quickly grab the top book, *Magical Creatures Big and Small*.

Jaxon doesn’t sit down like I expect but instead walks over to the bookcase where Hudson is perched and bends down to grab a book from the bottom shelf. For just a second, it looks like Hudson is going to kick him full-on in the face—completely unbeknownst to Jaxon, of course.

Don’t you dare, I mouth at Hudson.

Hudson gives me an arched brow, but in the end, he leaves Jaxon alone. “Overprotective much?”

I narrow my eyes at him. *From a murderer? Damn straight.*

“You do know that Jaxon’s the one who killed *me*, right?” He shakes his head as he hops off the shelf, turns away, and mutters, “This is my limit for abuse for one night. I’ve got more important things to do.”

And just like that, he disappears down one of the narrow rows between shelves toward the back of the library. It takes a minute for me to realize he’s following the same gargoyle path that I did the first time I’d entered the library. The first time I’d met Lia...

Even Homicidal Maniacs Have Their Limits



M*ore important things to do?* The words ricochet in my head.
“What does that mean?”

Hudson doesn’t answer.

“I’m serious, Hudson. What exactly are you planning to do?”

Still no answer. The jerk.

I try one more time, yelling down the aisle toward where Hudson disappeared. “You can’t just go around saying things like that and expect me to—”

Jaxon sits down and sighs. “Maybe we should do this another time.”

“Why?” I snap, my anger exploding out at him.

He raises a brow at my tone but keeps his voice mild when he answers. “I was asking if you want to try out the research thing another time, since you seem a little...preoccupied...yelling at my brother.”

Just like that, my anger drains away. Because it’s not Jaxon’s fault his brother is a douche who will use any means necessary to get his way.

“No, of course not. I’m so sorry. I think researching gargoyles is a great idea. I’ve been wanting to do that since I got back.”

“Are you sure?” Jaxon rests his hand over mine and squeezes gently. “I understand if you need to—”

“I need to be with you,” I answer, ignoring the residual tightness

in my stomach left over from Hudson's assholery. "And researching gargoyles—and how to get your brother out of my head once and for all—sounds like a really good idea right about now."

"To be fair, figuring out how to get Hudson out of your head sounds like a really good idea to me all the time," Jaxon tells me with a rueful shake of his head.

I laugh as I slip my hand out from under his. "You're not wrong about that."

I flip to the index at the back of the book and start looking for any topic that might be able to help us.

"So do you know anything about gargoyles?" I ask as I pull my notebook out of my backpack before settling down next to Jaxon. "I mean, surely some things are common knowledge, right? Like how even people who don't believe in them know that vampires can't come into a room uninvited or dragons like to hoard treasure." I pause as I rethink what I said. "Actually, I guess I don't know for sure that's true about dragons—"

"Oh, it's true," Jaxon tells me with a grin. But the grin fades pretty quickly into a thoughtful look as he taps his fingers on the table and stares off into space for several seconds.

"There are a lot of stories about gargoyles from the old days," he says eventually. "I'm not old enough to have met any—my father killed them all long before I was born."

His last sentence falls on the table like a grenade, one that takes a full three seconds before it explodes—and takes me with it. "Your father *killed* them?" I ask, and I can't keep the shock out of my voice.

"Yeah," he answers, and I've never seen him look more deeply ashamed.

"How?" I whisper.

I meant how did he kill them *all*, but Jaxon takes my question literally. "Gargoyles *can* die, Grace. Not easily, but they can. Of course, for the gargoyle *king*, he decided to kill him personally with an eternal bite."

Eternal bite? A shiver skates along my spine. "What's that?"

Jaxon sighs. "It's my father's gift. One bite is deadly. Absolutely no one has ever survived. Not even the gargoyle king himself."

I make a mental note to not get within biting distance of the king. Ever. "But the rest he just slaughtered the good old-fashioned way?"

"Well, his armies did, yes." He chuckles, but there's no humor in it. "Apparently a predilection for genocide runs in my family."

The word "genocide" slams into me with the power of a set of brass knuckles. I can't imagine anything worse for Hudson to have done, can't imagine how depraved—how downright evil—

"Oi, you can bugger right off with that!" Hudson suddenly shouts, coming back into the main area from the shadowy aisle.

The sudden towering rage in Hudson's voice has my eyes going wide and my heart pumping way too fast. It's so huge, so overwhelming, that I can feel it threatening the barricade I put up in my head. Can feel the cracks deep inside as the wall trembles.

"Hudson?" I manage to choke out. "Are you—"

But he's not done yet, his voice—and his insults—getting more British by the second. "Don't you fucking come at me with that bullshit, you fucking wanker! You're a daft bastard, and I'm fucking sick of you swanning around like the bloody little fucking bastard that you are!"

Again, the wall trembles. Again, more cracks spring up, and I try desperately to patch them even as I work to calm him down. "Hudson. Hey, Hudson."

He ignores me. He's pacing back and forth in front of the circulation desk as he yells more insults at Jaxon—who is completely oblivious to the fact that his older brother has just called him a rat-arsed git.

Jaxon gets to his feet now—I guess it's hard to miss that something is wrong as I chase Hudson around the front half of the library—fists clenched and eyes wild with concern as he stares at me. It's obvious

he's trying to find a way to fight his brother without hurting me, but he can't figure it out...because the only place Hudson really exists right now is inside me.

When he looks like he's going to say something else, I hold up a hand to settle him back down. The last thing we need is for him to say something else that sets Hudson off again.

He doesn't look happy, but he nods and slowly unclenches his fists. Convinced he isn't going to say anything else, I turn and walk over to Hudson.

"Hey, now. Hey, look at me." I put a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Hudson. Take a deep breath and look at me, okay?"

He whirls around then, and the look he turns on me is filled with such fulminating fury, such absolute, abject betrayal, that I can't help but stumble back a couple of steps.

I don't know if it was the stumble or the look on *my* face, but whatever it is, it brings Hudson back down in an instant. He doesn't apologize for his outburst, doesn't try to explain it. But he stops swearing, stops looking like he wants to tear the entire library—and Jaxon—apart. And skulks off to sit in one of the chairs by the window, his back to me.

I turn around to find Jaxon staring, and there's an edge in his eyes that has a chill working its way down my spine. Not because I think he'll hurt me—Jaxon would never do that—but because it makes him feel far away from me, distant in a way I didn't expect and don't know how to handle.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I don't mean to hurt you. It's just hard to ignore someone throwing a tantrum in my head. I wish I could," I tell him. "Even more, I wish he wasn't there at all. But he is, and I'm trying, Jaxon. I'm really trying."

The ice in his gaze melts at my words, and his whole body softens. "I know." He reaches for my hand, pulls me close. "You're handling so much right now. I wish I could take it all away from you."

"That's not your job."

"I'm your mate." He looks vaguely insulted. "If it's not my job, whose is it?"

"Mine," I whisper, going on tiptoes to press my lips, very softly, to his. "You're just the moral support."

He gives a startled laugh. "That's the first time I've ever been given that role."

"I bet. How does it feel?"

To his credit, he thinks about it for a moment before saying, "I don't like it."

I shoot him a fake shocked look, and he just laughs. Then says, "Do you want to hear about gargoyles or not?"

"I absolutely do."

Jaxon leads me back to the table and we settle into our seats again, reaching for the books we'd started to read before Hudson's outburst.

"Like I was saying, gargoyles are old—although not as old as vampires. No one knows how they were created—" He breaks off, thinks about it. "Or at least, *I* don't know how. I just know that they didn't exist before the First Great War but were around by the time of the Second. There are all kinds of origin stories, but my favorite ones always revolve around the witches bringing them into existence in the hopes of saving themselves and humans from another great war. Some say they used dark magic, but I never believed it. I always thought they asked a higher power for help, and that's why gargoyles have always been protectors."

Protectors. The word settles on me. It sinks into my bones, flows through my veins—because it feels right. It feels like the home I haven't had in four long months and, conversely, the home I've been looking for my entire life even though I didn't know it.

"What are we supposed to protect?" I ask, blood humming with the promise of what's to come.

"Magic itself," Jaxon tells me. "And all the factions who wield it in all their different ways."

"So not just witch magic, then."

“No, not just the witches. Gargoyles kept the balance among all the paranormals—vampires and werewolves, witches and dragons.” He pauses. “Mermaids and selkies and every other not-just-human creature on the planet—and also humans.”

“But why did your father kill the gargoyles, then? If they were the ones keeping everything balanced, why would he want to get rid of them?”

“Power,” Jaxon says. “He and my mother wanted more power, power they couldn’t just take with the gargoyles watching. And now they have it. They sit at the head of the Circle—”

“Amka mentioned the Circle to me. What is it?” I ask.

“The Circle is the ruling body that governs paranormals all over the world. My parents have the highest positions of power on the council, positions they inherited when my father instigated the destruction of all the gargoyles,” Jaxon explains.

“He instigated the *murdering* of all the gargoyles,” Hudson says from where he’s still near the window, “because he convinced his allies that the humans were planning another war, used the Salem Witch Trials to prove his point. And gargoyles were going to side with them.”

“He killed them all because of a war that never happened?” I whisper, horrified.

Jaxon turns the page in the book he’s currently thumbing through. “Well, this is what some people believe, yes.”

“He killed them all because he is an evil, selfish, power-hungry, cowardly arsehole,” Hudson corrects. “He’s drunk his own Kool-Aid and truly believes he’s the savior of our kind.”

I’m a little shocked—and a lot horrified—at how Hudson, of all people, describes his and Jaxon’s father. Hudson is the one who wanted to wipe the other species out of existence, so why does he sound so judgmental over the fact that his father did the same thing?

“I am *nothing* like my father,” Hudson grinds out, sounding more offended than I have ever heard him. “Nothing!”

I don’t contradict him, even though it seems absurd for him to

try to pretend away the similarities in his agenda and his father's. Sure, they went after different factions in their search for supremacy, but that doesn't make them different. It just makes them two sides of the same coin.

And I would do well to remember this before I get us all killed.

Because Hudson won't be in my head forever. And what he will do when he's out is anyone's guess.

Jaxon must be thinking the same thing, because he leans forward and says, "No matter what we have to do, we can never let my brother loose on the world with his power. My father killed the entire gargoyle race. Who knows what Hudson will do?"



Two Heads Aren't Better than One

I wait for Hudson to explode, but he doesn't say a word. In fact, he's so quiet that after several minutes of silence, I'd think Hudson had fallen asleep if I didn't see the way his foot is tap-tap-tapping on the ground as he stares out the window.

I don't know why he doesn't respond to Jaxon's words—maybe because he realizes everything Jaxon said about him is true. Maybe because he's embarrassed. Maybe because he got his burst of anger out earlier. I don't know. I just know that I expect some kind of response from him.

I've known Hudson for only a few days and already I know that it's not like him to be quiet. And it's definitely not like him not to have a comeback or six...

A sudden sadness swamps me, along with a wave of exhaustion that has me fighting back a yawn. Jaxon sees it, though—of course he does—and says, "Come on, the rest of the research can wait until tomorrow. Let's get you back to your room."

I want to argue, but I'm fading fast, so I just nod. "Don't we need to clean up first?" I gesture to the table where the candles still burn.

"I can walk you to your room, then come back and clean up." Jaxon starts gently herding me toward the library door.

"Don't be ridiculous. It'll take ten minutes, and then we can

head back to my room.”

Turns out, it barely takes five minutes to get everything picked up and put away before we’re on our way to my room. When we get there, I know Jaxon expects to be able to kiss me like he did yesterday, but Hudson isn’t asleep now. He’s not talking to me, but he’s very definitely aware of what’s going on, and I can’t just make out with Jaxon when his brother is watching—especially not when he’s watching from inside my head.

The last thing I want is for him (or anyone) to know what I’m thinking when Jaxon kisses me...or worse, what I’m feeling. It’s personal and private and nobody’s business but mine.

So when Jaxon moves to set the huge vase of flowers on the floor beside my door, I put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Three’s a crowd,” I tell him.

He looks confused, but my meaning must register because he nods and steps away. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then? We can meet for breakfast at ten, then research at the library after that, if it works for you?”

“I can’t think of a better way to spend a Saturday morning than with you,” I tell him.

“Good.” He starts to hand me my flowers, but I wrap my arms around him in a huge hug first, pulling his face down to mine so I can give him a superfast peck on the lips.

“Thank you for tonight. It was awesome.”

“Yeah?” He looks embarrassed but also a little pleased. I’ll admit it’s an adorable look on him.

“Yeah. You’re...” I trail off as I struggle to put my thoughts into words.

Jaxon leans against the doorframe then, a shit-eating grin on his face and a huge vase of flowers in his arms, and somehow still manages to look sexy as fuck. “I’m what?” he asks, making a ridiculous face.

“A total dork,” I answer after I burst out laughing.

He laughs, too. “Not quite what I was going for, but I’ll take it.” He hands me my flowers, then bends down to kiss my cheek.

“Because I’ll take you.”

My heart turns into an actual puddle—there’s no other word for it. “Good,” I answer. “Because I’ll take you, too.”

And then Jaxon is opening the door and I’m floating inside, heart and head full of this boy, this powerful, perfect boy who makes me feel things I never imagined possible.

Macy’s not here—probably out with some of the witches doing witch things—so I put the flowers on my desk before flopping down on my bed. A couple of minutes later, I turn on my favorite playlist and grab the book off my nightstand. But it’s the same book I was reading four months ago when I turned into a gargoyle, so I can’t follow the plot.

Three minutes and five pages later and I put the book down. I consider streaming something from Netflix, but nothing sounds good, and eventually I end up wandering around my room, touching everything as I look for something to do.

Turns out, there’s nothing to do—it’s been a long time since I’ve been in my room alone, and it feels so awkward, I almost can’t believe I’m in the right place. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, considering when I got to Katmere Academy, all I wanted was to be on my own, and now I feel like I’m about to jump out of my skin.

Finally, I decide to take a shower so I can go to bed, but I’m halfway to the bathroom, pajamas in my hand, when I realize I can’t do that. Last night when I showered, Hudson was asleep. Tonight, he isn’t.

He’s being unnaturally quiet and hasn’t said a word to me since Jaxon’s outburst in the library, but he’s sprawled out on Macy’s bed reading—I stretch a little bit to get a look at the front of his book—*Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, and I wonder idly if he relates to Rodion, who ends up killing people for his own selfish needs.

I hesitate. I want to wash my hair, but there’s no way I’m going to strip naked and take a shower with him watching me, whether he seems like he’s reading or not. How could he not see me naked if I can see myself naked? I mean, he’s *in* my head.

"I wouldn't do that." I nearly jump when Hudson finally speaks to me out of the blue. He's still on Macy's bed, with his ankles crossed and his arms folded beneath his head, but now his book is lying across his chest.

There are a million other questions I want to ask him—namely what made him so upset that he shut down to begin with—but I settle for asking about his immediate statement first. "What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't watch you take a shower or get undressed. You don't have to worry about that."

"Yeah, but how could you *not* watch? You're literally in my head, even though it seems like you're over there on Macy's bed." I tap my head. "You're still right here."

"I don't know. The best I can do is close my eyes and go deep inside my own mind so I'm not really active in yours at the time. I guess we'll see. But take your shower. You don't have anything gross to fear from me."

"Is that what you did at the end, in the library? Went deep into your own mind?" I don't know why it matters, don't know why I don't just take the win and be happy he left me alone for as long as he did. But I don't feel particularly happy, and I want to know what shut Hudson down to begin with.

"No," he answers after a second. "I've been here all along. I just..."

"What?"

"I don't know." He shakes his head. "I guess I just wanted to think for a while."

"I can understand that."

He smiles, and for the first time tonight, it's not mocking. But it's not happy, either. It's just kind of...sad. "Can you?"

It's a good question, one I don't know the answer to. I think I have a lot on my mind—pun maybe, kind of, totally intended—but for the first time, I wonder what it must be like to be Hudson. Trapped in the head of a girl you barely know and who has made no secret of the fact that she doesn't like you, stuck there until she can figure out how to not only get you out of her head but also to make you human,

something you've never been in your life.

I know how alienated and strange I feel knowing that a part of me is gargoyle, not human. How much more awful must it feel to be a vampire and know that by the time you're free, you will have lost the most basic building block of who you are?

It's a terrible thought, the idea of being responsible for stripping Hudson of his very identity. But at the same time, what's the alternative? Set him free and hope he doesn't decide to use his very formidable powers to launch a war on the entire world?

He's done absolutely nothing to earn the kind of trust that would require.

"You're right," he tells me after a second.

"About what?"

He rolls over on the bed, gives me his back. And says, "You don't have a clue what it's like to be me."

It's a true statement but also a hurtful one, and for long seconds I stand there wondering how to respond. But in the end, there is no response—or at least no *good* response—and I decide now might be the perfect time for me to take that shower. In the mood he's in, I'm pretty sure Hudson will have absolutely no interest in breaking his promise.

"*I wouldn't break my promise anyway.*" The comment slides insidiously into my mind, so slowly and quietly that it takes me a moment to even recognize it for what it is.

But once I do, I can't help answering back: *I know*. Because I do, even though I don't know how I know.

It's only later, after I'm washing the conditioner out of my hair, that something occurs to me. It wasn't that I was bored when I first got to my room. It wasn't that I didn't know what to do with myself that made me unable to settle.

It was the fact that Hudson wasn't there, in my head, saying all the ridiculous, snarky, hilarious things that he normally says that had me so discombobulated.

It doesn't make any sense, but somehow, in the space of only a couple of days, I've grown used to having his voice in my head. I've grown used to his running commentary and his puffed-up opinions and even the way he pushes at me to get me to admit what I really think and feel.

I don't know how it happened when I hate the guy and everything he stands for—everything he once did. But it did happen, and now I don't have a clue what to do about the fact that maybe, just maybe, I'm beginning to think of Hudson as something more than an enemy. Not a friend—I'm not childish enough to lower my guard that much—but something that isn't entirely hateful, either.

It's not the best description ever, and I expect a snarky comment as soon as I make it, but nothing comes. Because Hudson is doing what he said he would—giving me the privacy I need.

And that just makes me more confused.

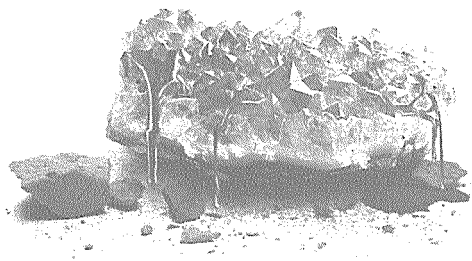
I get out of the shower and dry off so quickly that my PJs are still sticking to damp spots when I brush my teeth and finally head to bed.

As I slide under my covers, I glance over at Macy's side of the room and realize Hudson is gone. He's so quiet that I figure he must be asleep. Which is probably a good thing, considering I have to think, really think, and the last thing I need right now is him peering over my shoulder while I do.

Because the truth is, I can't just sit around waiting for him to do something awful. I can already feel cracks in the shield I put up to keep him locked away, and who knows what he'll do once it's weak enough for him to get through?

Now that it's the weekend, I've got to step up my search for the objects I need to get him out of my head. Jaxon reminded me just how dangerous and untrustworthy he is. Add that to the cracks in the wall...and suddenly it's beginning to feel like it's going to be days, not weeks, before he breaks through.

And then we'll all be screwed.



Leave Your Daddy Issues at the Door

I wake up to a screaming alarm and sunlight filtering in through the one window in our dorm room.

“Turn it off,” Macy complains from her bed, where she’s busy shoving a pillow over her head. “For the love of God, turn it off.”

I do, but then I roll out of bed because it’s nine fifteen and I have to be in the cafeteria in forty-five minutes. Which shouldn’t be such a chore, but I had a hard time sleeping last night, and today I am dragging already.

I make my way to the bathroom as quietly as I can to splash water on my face and brush my teeth, but Macy rolls over after a minute and asks, “Where are you going?”

“I’m meeting Jaxon for breakfast; then we’re going to the library to research.” I stare at her sleepy eyes. “You do remember I have a vampire in my brain and my walls won’t hold him in check forever, yes?”

Macy groans and whines into her pillow for a minute, but then she pushes back her covers and sits up, feet on the floor.

I burst out laughing at my first good look at her, and she gives me a disgruntled pout in return. I try to apologize, but I can’t. Every time I look at her, I end up grinning, because she looks ridiculous.

Her hot-pink hair is sticking up in what looks like a rooster comb

and her eye makeup—which she must have gone heavy on last night—has smeared all over her eyes so that she looks like a raccoon. An adorable raccoon, but a raccoon nonetheless.

“Why are you getting up?” I ask as I make my way to my closet. “Go back to sleep. You look like you need it.”

“You have no idea. One of the wolves had a party last night, and it got a little out of control.” She waves a hand up and down in front of her face. “Hence the old-hag look.”

“That’s not quite how I would describe it, but okay.” I grin at her. “So that begs the question, why are you getting up when you have all day to recuperate?”

“Because I’m going with you, silly.”

“What? No, you don’t have to do that. We’re just going to sit around and read dusty books all day.”

“I can sit around with the best of them.” Macy pushes to her feet and stumbles her way over to the bathroom. “Besides, I’m really good at research. Like, wicked good, even without the spells. So I’ll help you until I have to meet Gwen at two.”

“There’s a spell to help you research?” I ask, fascinated at the idea.

She rolls her eyes—or at least, I think she does. The insanely heavy, smeared eye makeup makes it impossible to tell. “There’s a spell for everything if you look hard enough.”

“Everything?” I ask, but she’s already shut the bathroom door behind her. Seconds later, I hear the shower go on.

“Everything,” Hudson answers. “Witches are nothing if not practical creatures. Why do something the hard way if you can hack it?”

He’s sitting on the floor near the door, knees up and arms draped over them. For the first time since he showed up in my head, he’s dressed in a pair of faded jeans. They’re ripped at the knees, frayed around the bottom, and somehow manage to look amazing on him. As does the white T-shirt he’s wearing.

“What about vampires?” I ask, because I’m curious. And because

I'm anxious to distract myself from the fact that Hudson looks good—and that I've noticed that fact. "Are they practical, too?"

He snorts. "Only when it comes to who they're going to eat."

"That's awful!" I tell him, but I'm laughing just a little.

"Yeah, well, awful and true usually go hand in hand." He runs his palms over his knees in a gesture that looks an awful lot like nerves. "Or haven't you figured that out yet?"

That he believes this says a lot about Hudson. But he's not usually so brutal, and I can't help wondering what happened in the middle of the night that turned him so massively bitter. I think about asking him, but things are relatively peaceful right now, and I'd rather try to keep it that way. Especially since I'm meeting up with Jaxon in less than an hour.

"I'm going to change, okay?" I tell Hudson as I cross to my closet to pick something to wear.

He waves a hand in that negligent "do what you want" way that he has, but he also tilts his head back against the wall and closes his eyes.

"Thank you," I tell him as I start to browse through my clothes.

He doesn't answer.

I move to pull out one of the outfits Macy got me when I first moved here, but in the end I settle on a turquoise tank top and black yoga pants from my old life. Because I now live in a sometimes-drafty old castle in Alaska and I don't want to spend the next ten hours of my life freezing, I layer my favorite cardigan over the tank top. As its worn softness settles around me, I feel more like myself than I have since I turned back from being stone.

It's a good feeling.

"I'm done," I tell Hudson softly, and he nods, but he doesn't open his eyes.

And as I stand here with this unique, unprecedented chance to study him uninterrupted—usually he's wide awake and trading barbs with me every time I so much as get a glimpse of him—I can't help but realize how tired he looks.

I get it. I've had two solid nights of sleep and I still feel like I've been run over by a semi. But his tiredness looks edgier, harder, more soul deep, and I wonder what's going on in his head. I wonder what he's feeling, if anything.

Four days ago, it would have been impossible for me to imagine that I would worry about Hudson, even for a second. I still can't believe it now. Not after everything he's done, to Jaxon and to everyone else here at Katmere. Not after everything he wanted to do to the world.

I wonder if this is what Stockholm Syndrome feels like? Despite everything your captor has done, all the horrible things they are, you start to identify with them anyway? God, I really hope that's not the case.

"I think you should be more concerned about whether reverse Stockholm Syndrome is a thing, don't you? Considering you're the one who has been holding me captive for almost three and a half months?" The crisp British accent is back, and when he opens his eyes, so is the superior smirk that makes Hudson...Hudson.

My eyes go wide. "Me? You're the one who won't leave my head!"

"Won't leave your head?" he scoffs. "Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? I'm desperate to leave your head. You're the one who wastes time going to classes and painting pictures—oh, and kissing my brother—when you should be looking for a bloodstone!"

"I'm sorry that me *living my life* is such a waste of time for you, but I can't just drop everything and run around the world to stop you from having a temper tantrum," I shoot back.

"Temper tantrum?" His voice is dangerously low. "That's the second time you've accused me of having a temper tantrum when I've expressed legitimate concerns about your attitude. I put up with it the first time, but now I'm warning you. Don't do it again."

I take exception at the warning, not to mention the look in his eyes when he issues it. "Or what?" I ask, my entire body crackling with outrage.

Suddenly he's up and across the room, his face several inches

from mine. “Or I’ll stop playing nice, and that’s something I’m not sure you—or your precious little mate—can handle.”

“You think taking over my body and leaving me covered in blood is playing nice?” I screech, about half an octave shy of the pitch needed to actually break glass. “You think making snide comments about your brother every second I’m with him is *playing nice*?”

His eyes narrow to slits. “Compared to what you’re doing to me? Hell yeah, I think I’m playing nice.”

“Doing to you? *Doing to you?*” I throw my hand in a “step right up” kind of gesture. “Please, feel free. Tell me exactly what it is that I’m doing to you that’s so awful besides trying to find a way for you to live outside of my head?”

“You—” He breaks off, fists clenched and jaw working as he stares me down. “I—” With a roar, he whirls around and punches a fist straight through the nearest wall.

I rear back, shocked at the depth of his fury. Shocked even more by the fact that there’s an actual fist-size hole in the wall next to my head. I look down at my hands, wondering if maybe he took over my mind long enough for me to somehow punch the hole.

But my hands are fine, and the knuckles aren’t the least bit red. So no, I didn’t punch the wall. Hudson did. The only question is *how*?

Fear races through me at the idea that he can wield that kind of power even when he’s bodyless. Even when he’s inside me. I know his main power is that of persuasion, and for the first time, I wonder if he’s using it on me without my knowledge.

Maybe that’s why I feel bad for him sometimes. Maybe that’s why, last night, I thought that maybe he wasn’t quite the enemy I’d been afraid he would be. Maybe that’s why—

“Could you just stop?” Hudson whispers, and he looks weaker and more sickly than I have ever seen him. “Not forever, but just for a few minutes. Could you please just stop?”

Gargoyles Need a Little Glamour, Too



“S_{top} what?” I ask, baffled, as he turns away.
His shoulders sag.

“Hudson?” I prompt when he doesn’t answer, but he just shakes his head as he walks over to the window so he can look out at the snow. “Stop what?”

He laughs, but it’s not his normal sarcastic laugh. Instead, it’s just...sad. “The fact that you don’t know says everything.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that, so I don’t say anything. Silence billows around us like a piece of the shiny tissue paper my mom always wrapped my presents in—weightless and so, so fragile—and the longer it goes on, the more I’m afraid to break it. The more I’m afraid that if I do, I’ll also break the weird truce that Hudson and I have had going on for the last two days.

And if I do, what happens then?

Thankfully, Macy comes to the rescue—as usual. At nine forty-five, a full fifteen minutes before I have to meet Jaxon at the cafeteria, she comes bopping out of the bathroom looking a million times better than when she went in.

“Give me five minutes to find my shoes and do a quick glamour, and we can be on our way,” she says as she walks to her closet.

“Why do you always get the glamour, and I always have to look

like this?" I ask, waving a hand in front of my face.

"Because you have the gorgeous hair. And you look fine. Honest."

She wiggles her hands in front of her face and chants a few words under her breath, and suddenly her hair is dry and her face looks a little brighter, a little smoother, a little more beautiful.

"You're disgusting," I tell her.

"Fine, fine, fine." She rolls her eyes. "Come here and I'll do one on you."

Excitement flutters in my chest. "Really?"

"Really. I would have done one before, but you never seemed interested. It's easy-peasy."

Normally, I'm not interested—I'm pretty resigned to my cute-on-a-good-day looks. But after everything that's already happened with Hudson and what I'm afraid is still to come once Hudson and Jaxon are back in the same room together, I could use the extra armor.

So I cross the room to Macy, tilt my face up to hers—since she's eight inches taller than I am, which is also totally not anything I'm jealous about—and wait for her to work her magic.

"Close your eyes," she tells me, so I do and wait for her to finish. And wait. And wait. And wait.

"Do I need that much work?" I joke, cracking my eyes open when Macy lets out an impatient sigh.

"You don't need any work," she answers. "Which is a good thing, because my glamour isn't working on you."

"What do you mean, it's not working on me?"

"I mean, it's not working." She looks baffled. "I don't understand. The third time I tried, I even used a more complicated one, but it didn't work, either. And it always works. I don't understand."

"Obviously it's because I'm already too glamorous," I tease. "I mean—" I wave a hand up and down myself in a "look at me" joke.

"Right?" Macy agrees. "That must be it."

I laugh and bump her gently with my shoulder. "I was just joking, you dork."

"I know." She winks at me. "But you're adorable, so..."

"Adorable sometimes," I agree with a sigh. "Glamorous? Absolutely never. Even your magic knows that, obviously."

She rolls her eyes a second time. "Give me a break. I just wish I could figure out what's going on."

Me too. I wonder if it's some weird gargoye thing we haven't figured out. Some rule like Stone Shall Never Be Glamorous or something like that... Just my luck.

She reaches a hand across the room to her closet and murmurs something under her breath. Seconds later, her favorite pair of Roth's floats right into her hand. "So my magic isn't on the fritz." She turns to me with a shrug. "I don't get it."

"Yeah, me neither." I wait for Hudson to chime in—having lived several hundreds of years, he knows a lot more than either of us about magical things—and usually can't wait to make me feel naïve by pointing out what he considers obvious. But he is still looking out the window...and being stubbornly silent.

"I'll ask my dad the next time I see him. In the meantime, I guess you're going to have to settle for being adorable instead of glamorous. Think you can handle it?"

It's my turn to roll my eyes. "Semi-adorable, and I handle it every other day of my life, don't I?"

"Whatever." Macy crosses the room to get her phone and then gasps when she comes face-to-face with the hole Hudson left in the wall.

"What happened?" she asks, her gaze darting back and forth between the hole and me. "My dad is going to flip!"

"Hudson and I were having a fight, so..."

"So you punched the wall?" Her eyes are practically popping out of her head.

"Of course not! *He* punched the wall." I hold up a hand to stop what I'm sure is about to be a million questions. "And before you ask me, no, I have no idea how he did it. We were arguing, he got mad, and then I watched him punch the wall. When he pulled back, boom.

There was a hole directly where he punched.”

“I don’t understand how someone without a body could do that. I mean, does he still have access to his powers?” She looks horrified at the very idea.

“I don’t think so. Wouldn’t I know if he did?” But just the idea has me worrying even more than I already was. What if he’s been persuading me all along and I just didn’t know it?

“Jesus, I haven’t been persuading you,” Hudson snaps. “Can you please give it a rest? I’m not actually Satan.”

“I never said you were!” I snap back, doing my best to ignore the relief I feel in the pit of my stomach over the fact that he’s talking to me again. “But do you blame me for wondering?”

Macy, obviously realizing I’m fighting with Hudson again, rolls her eyes and starts gathering up her class supplies into her backpack.

“You’re bloody right, I do!” The fact that the Britishisms are coming back tells me just how upset he actually is. “Don’t you think things would look a lot different if I was actually using my gift on you? You’d be doing whatever I tell you to instead of arguing with me until I want to pull my bleeding hair out.”

“Well, excuse me for remaining a sentient being with thoughts and ideas of my own. So sorry to inconvenience you.”

Is it a bitchy response? Yeah. Do I care? Not even a little bit. He deserves it with his silent treatment one second and his “lord of the manor” attitude the next.

“You’ve been inconveniencing me since the day I laid eyes on you,” he growls. “Why should today be any different?”

“You know what? Why don’t you bite me?” I shoot him a mock-innocent look. “Oh, wait. I forgot. You can’t.”

Hudson’s growl becomes a snarl, and he finally turns from the window and stalks across the room toward me. But then he stops several feet short of me, hands shoved into his back pockets as he stares me down with narrowed eyes. “You’re going to push too far one of these days. You know that, right?”

"And then what? You're going to punch another wall?" I narrow my eyes right back. "Don't threaten me. I'm not some scared little girl who's just going to fall in line. If you wanted that, you should have holed up inside some sweet little human's brain instead of mine."

"Some sweet little human?" he repeats, and just like that, his anger is gone, replaced by an amusement that's almost palpable. "So the gargoyle thing is starting to grow on you, hmm?"

I don't know what to say to that, don't even know how I feel about what I just said. So I do the only thing I can do in this situation—I ignore his question completely.

"Come on, Macy. We need to get to the cafeteria. Jaxon's going to think I forgot about him—again."

"I'm ready," my cousin answers. She grins. "I've just been waiting for you and Hudson to stop tearing into each other. I gotta say, your face was priceless."

"How did I look?" I ask as we close the door behind us and start walking down the hallway.

"Like you wanted to murder a small village. Or, you know, a major metropolitan area."

"Now you're talking my kind of fun," Hudson joins in. "Just tell me when and where and I'm there."

"Wouldn't you be there anyway? Considering we are currently attached?" I raise my brows at the fact that the worst seems to be over—at least for now.

"It was a figure of speech. You know what those are, right?"

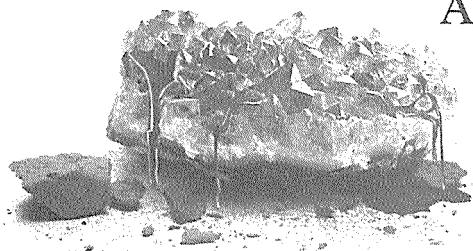
"You mean like verbs? Nouns? Adjectives?" I tease him, because of course I know what a figure of speech is. I also know what colloquial phrases are, which is what he actually threw at me.

Hudson rubs his eyes. "You scare me sometimes, you know that? You really do."

I laugh, then throw him a colloquial phrase right back. "Baby, you haven't seen anything yet."

He sighs. "Don't I know it."

Are you Bloodstoned?



“So I have a question,” I tell Macy as we walk to the cafeteria. “Sure.” She looks at me quizzically.

“How obvious was it that I was fighting with Hudson back in our dorm room? Because if people can tell, I’m sure they’re thinking there’s something seriously wrong with me.”

“Umm, too late for that,” she teases. But when I shoot her an exasperated look, she relents. “I think you forget where you are. Last year, a witch turned herself invisible for almost six months. People spent a semester walking around looking like they were talking to the walls. Weird shit happens here every day. Nobody even blinks most of the time.”

“Yeah, well, they blink at me. All the time.”

“We’ve been through this. Dating Jaxon means half the school hates you and the other half wants to be you. That’s just how it is. Add in the gargoyle thing and it’s not the talking to Hudson that’s going to make people stare at you. So relax, okay?”

I turn her words over in my head. “Yeah, okay.”

Jaxon is walking into the cafeteria just as we get there—and at least half of the Order is with him: Mekhi, whom I haven’t seen since he brought me Jaxon’s jacket, and Luca and Rafael.

All three grin at me like I’m Christmas—or at least Halloween.

“About time you decided to show your face down here,” Mekhi tells me as he wraps me up in a huge, ocean-scented hug. “We’ve been bugging Jaxon about when we were going to get the chance to see you.”

Luca’s and Rafael’s hugs are more restrained—we don’t know each other as well—but they both welcome me back enthusiastically.

Jaxon gives them a couple of minutes, then elbows his way through the group to pull me out and get things moving. “Hungry?” he asks as we walk toward the main cafeteria line.

“I am, actually.” I’m a little surprised by the fact that I’m starving again. Either fighting with Hudson burns a ton of calories or I’m still making up for the fact that I went fifteen weeks without food.

I grab a tray, pile it high with eggs, toast, and hash browns. Jaxon adds a packet of cherry Pop-Tarts with a wink, then heads off to get his own breakfast while I pour myself two of the world’s largest cups of coffee.

Macy—who is a self-proclaimed caffeine addict—gives me a wide-eyed look when I reach for the second cup, but she doesn’t say anything. A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do, after all.

It’s not long before we’re seated at a table. Jaxon and the other vamps are all drinking their breakfast out of stainless-steel tumblers—a concession to the fact that I’m new to watching the whole blood-drinking thing, I’m sure—while Macy and I drink our coffee like we’re mainlining it.

My bizarre life is definitely catching up with me, and right now I feel like there’s not enough caffeine in the world. Jaxon must feel the same way, because he’s looking a little haggard, too.

“You okay?” I whisper, sliding my hand into his as the others laugh and joke around us.

“Yeah.” He smiles back. “This is the first time I’ve fed in a couple of days, and I think it’s wearing on me. Especially after the trip to the Bloodletter.”

“Jaxon, you can’t do that! I know you’ve been worried about me, but you need to take care of yourself, too.”

I burrow into him, and as I do, I feel that same warmth glowing inside me...and between us. *The mating bond?* I wonder. Most of the time I barely notice it—maybe because I still don’t know as much about it as I should—but right now I can feel a connection between us, bright and lovely.

I lean into it a little, loving the way it feels. Loving even more the way Jaxon feels at the other end of it—warm and welcoming and strong and steady.

I don’t know what I’m doing, don’t know, even, how to interact with the bond. But Jaxon looks so soft and sleepy and unlike himself that I can’t help reaching out. Can’t help closing my eyes and putting a hand across his heart, on this space where it feels like something exists between us, and smiling at him warmly.

Jaxon’s cheeks start to have a little more color in them, and his eyes look more alert, so I pull back even as I squeeze the hand I’m still holding in my own.

His midnight eyes heat up at the connection between us, his brows quirking in a sexy way that has me burrowing even deeper into his side and whispering, “Later,” into his ear.

As I relinquish the last of my hold on the bond, Hudson flops down in an empty spot at the table and snarls, “At least warn me the next time you’re going to do something so completely nauseating,” he orders. “I can go look out a window or something.”

He’s my mate. I’m allowed to fawn all over him if I want to.

Hudson’s only response is a narrowing of his eyes and a growl so intense that it actually sends a shiver down my spine.

“You’re really going to spend the afternoon jumping off the castle?” Macy is asking the vamp contingent at the table.

Jumping off the castle? I mouth to Jaxon, who just inclines his head in a “what can we do?” way.

“Got to start practicing for Ludares, don’t we?” Mekhi answers her. “It’ll be here before we know it.”

“So you guys are really going to compete?” I ask, looking at Jaxon.

"I heard it was dangerous."

The entire table turns to stare at me, eyebrows raised.

"So what if it's dangerous?" Rafael answers. "It's our last year at Katmere—been waiting for the chance to dominate the tourney forever. Damn straight we're going to compete."

"Besides, there's danger, Grace, and then there's *danger*." Mekhi grins at me. "No one's actually died from competing in the Ludares."

"*Nobody's died?* Are you kidding me with this? How is the fact that nobody's died *yet* a ringing endorsement for this game?" I look to my cousin for a little solidarity, but she's right there with the others, a patronizing look on her face, like *I'm* the one who doesn't understand.

And that's when it dawns on me. "Wait a minute, Macy. You're not actually going to compete in a game where danger is the first adjective that comes to everyone's mind, too, are you?"

"'Danger' is the second adjective," Luca tells me with a grin. "'Fun' is the first."

"Oh, well, in that case, of course we should all compete," I tell him. "Wouldn't want to miss out on a good time."

"Exactly!" Rafael says with a wink. "Plus, you know, if any of us ever hopes to end up on the Circle, well...training starts now!"

"You mean that's still a thing?" I ask. I vaguely remember Amka mentioning something about how Ludares originally wasn't a game but a trial to end up on the Circle, but to be honest, I haven't thought much about it. "You play a game to become a Circle member? What if you suck at sports?"

Jaxon chuckles. "Ludares started out as a competition for the strongest mated pairs. If you survived the test, you earned a seat on the Circle."

Mekhi smiles. "Can you imagine how brutal it was? One mated pair against *eight* kick-ass opponents? I would have loved to have seen Jaxon's or Flint's parents compete to be on the Circle. It must have been *wild*."

Umm, yeah, *so* not my idea of a good time. At all. "So only mated

pairs can sit on the Circle, then?” I didn’t expect that, but I probably should have, considering both of Jaxon’s and Flint’s parents are on it.

Jaxon nods. “Pretty much—it takes at least two people to survive the Trial, or so they say.” He squeezes my hand, his gaze holding mine. “I keep thinking we should do it one day. The Circle needs someone to lead it who won’t let that happen.”

“Us? Why? I thought you hated all the prince stuff?” I mean, being queen certainly isn’t on my agenda. I’m more interested in art school, even if I have to do a gap year because of the whole “trapped as a gargoyle for four months” mess that screwed up college apps and everything else in my life, apparently.

“I do,” he assures me. “But there’s been a Third Great War brewing for a long time, and Hudson only exacerbated it with the shit he pulled before he died.”

“Yes, let’s blame me for the fact that Dad and the wolves are teaming up with made vampires so they can wipe everyone else out of existence.” Hudson rolls his eyes. “What a wanker.”

“What does that have to do with *us* being the head of the Circle?” I ask Jaxon, though I definitely want to follow up on Hudson’s comment later, because it sounded very different from anything else I’ve heard.

“Gargoyles are peacekeepers,” Mekhi interjects. “If you and Jaxon take his parents’ place, you have a much better chance of keeping shit under control. Between Jaxon’s power and your ability to chill things out—”

“I can do that?” I interrupt.

“That’s what the old stories all say,” Rafael tells me. “Gargoyles were created to keep the balance among the factions.”

“Exactly. So when my parents abdicate, we can take their place and get things going back in the right direction,” Jaxon says seriously. “Which definitely includes avoiding war.”

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen.” Hudson rolls his eyes. “First of all, the only way dear old Dad would abdicate is if you severed his head from his body and then burned him, twice. And even then I’m

not so sure. And secondly, who says sitting on the Circle is a good thing anyway? Jaxon may suddenly have this starry-eyed vision of how easy it will be to stop a war, but the truth is, it's hard and it's bloody brutal." He speaks with assurance, like he knows what he's talking about.

"Besides, it's not like being on the Circle is such a good thing. I'd rather stay off the damn council and keep my mate safe than be on it and always have to worry about someone trying to kill her to take our place. Trust Jaxon to not give a shit about that part."

"What if someone's mate dies?" I ask. "How does that work?"

"Usually, that only happens if someone murders them," Macy says. "Vampires are the only immortal creatures, but the rest of us tend to live a really long time."

"You wouldn't have to worry about that," Jaxon insists. "No one will ever try to touch you once we lead the Circle. No one would dare."

I don't know how I feel about any of this, including the fact that Jaxon has apparently been making plans in his head for our future without consulting me at all. And the fact that he seems to think it's going to be his job to take care of me for the rest of our lives. I mean, I'm okay with taking care of each other, but I'm not okay with being some kind of burden he's responsible for.

No effing way. I'll just have to double my efforts researching gargoyles. I don't want to be anyone's burden. I want to take care of myself.

Jaxon turns to discuss some particularly cool strategy with Mekhi, and I can't stop my gaze from seeking out Hudson's to see if he agrees with Jaxon that I need protecting.

"You could kick all our asses, Grace." Hudson's fathomless blue eyes never leave mine. "And then some."

I laugh. I can't help it. I don't believe him even a little, but the tightness in my chest eases a little bit, anyway. I mean, if *Hudson* thinks I'm kick-ass, that's gotta count for something, right?

"Damn straight it does." Hudson grins at me, and I realize I've

missed it in the time he's been so quiet.

Before I can think much about that, though, Macy complains about a wolf she wants to teach a lesson. When she doesn't elaborate, I remember she never answered my earlier question. "Macy? You're not really competing, are you?"

Macy's whole face lights up. "Of course I'm competing! This is the first year I *can* compete, and I can't effing wait!"

"You go, girl," Flint says as he drops down onto a chair at the end of the table beside Hudson, who gets up and leans against a nearby wall. "This year's tournament is going to be epic."

Flint holds a hand out for a fist bump, and Macy nearly swallows her tongue. Right before she bumps his fist hard enough to give herself a bruise. Apparently, some things never change...

"Completely epic," Jaxon agrees. "When do we need to register our team by?"

"This Wednesday," Flint says. He waits for a few seconds, then says oh so casually but not actually casually at all, "Do you guys have your team together yet, Jaxon?"

Jaxon eyes him for a few seconds, and at first I'm confused by what's going on—if Jaxon is going to do this, isn't he going to compete with the Order? But then I remember what Hudson told me yesterday about how the game fosters interspecies relationships...and injuries, apparently.

"You want to team up?" Jaxon asks, just as casually but not really.

"I was thinking about it. Eden and I were going to partner up with Xavier, but we still need to add some vamps and witches." He looks at me. "And maybe a gargoyle?"

When hell freezes over.

Win, Lose, or Die



“What? Me?” I ask, my eyes going huge. “I mean...I don’t think... Can gargoyles really compete?” I know Amka said I could, but I thought she was just teasing me.

And, by the way, please let the answer be no. Please let the answer be no. I’m not fabulous at sports to begin with, let alone paranormal sports where the goal is not to die, but there is no guarantee. Not to mention the fact that I have no idea what my powers are yet... I mean, besides turning to stone, which doesn’t seem very helpful in a game anyway.

“Ludares is open to every junior and senior in the school,” Flint tells me. “So, hell yeah, you can compete. Plus, I’m totally down with having a gargoyle on my team. Who knows what you can do?”

“Nothing,” I answer. “I can do nothing. That’s the problem.”

“That’s not true,” Hudson tells me from where he’s still leaning against the wall. “You can do things. You just don’t know what they are yet.”

“How do you know?” Equal parts terror and excitement thrum through me as I lean forward. “Did you see me do something when we were together?”

The whole table is staring at me again. I ignore them because apparently this is my life for now. I hadn’t meant to ask the question out

loud, but sometimes I get so caught up or invested in the conversation that I don't realize what I'm doing.

I vaguely register Macy telling everyone that I can see and talk to Hudson—at least I think that's what she says because suddenly everyone in the Order tenses up and turns to Jaxon, who just shrugs. Which is fine with me, since right now I'm more interested in hearing what Hudson has to say than I am worried about Jaxon's friends staring at me.

"You mean besides keeping me trapped in stone with you for nearly three and a half months?" He raises one brow.

I sigh and throw my hands up. Because I already know that. "Yeah, that's basically my point. I can't imagine being much help on a team when all I can do is turn to stone. It's kind of easy to catch me that way."

Hudson chuckles. "There's more, you know. Like, the wings aren't for decoration only—you just need to figure out how to use them."

That's true. And Flint did offer to teach me—maybe I should take him up on those flying lessons sooner rather than later. I mean, if I can even turn back into a gargoyle again. I haven't felt so much as a tingling over the last four days.

"I think I'll sit the game out," I say to the table at large, who are all still gaping at me—well, except for Flint and Macy, who are reminiscing about past Ludaes tournaments. "I mean, you make it sound like so much fun, but—"

"No way!" Flint pauses with his fork in midair. "You have to play. Besides, your uncle mentioned that the prize this year is kick-ass."

"Oh yeah?" Macy bounces excitedly. "What is it? He hasn't even told me yet."

"I was in his office when he got the call yesterday; that's the only reason I know," Flint tells her. "It looks like Byron's parents have decided to donate the prize this year."

"Really?" Mekhi looks surprised.

Actually, everyone at the table does. I remember Jaxon telling me Byron was the Order member whose mate was killed by a few members of Cole's pack. Though, for a while at least, Byron seemed to

think Hudson had somehow influenced the wolves to do what they did.

Hudson raises his brows. “Do I just get blamed for *everyone’s* deaths now?” He clenches his jaw and turns to read tomorrow’s menu posted on the wall.

“Stop taunting us and just tell us what the prize is, Flint.” Macy’s voice—a little whiny and a little annoyed—is what draws my attention back to the conversation this time.

Well, that and Jaxon shifting so that he’s pressed against my back, his chin resting on my shoulder.

I turn my face to the left so I can smile at him, and he winks back, then gives me a sexy little eyebrow raise that makes me think all kinds of things I shouldn’t be thinking about in the middle of the cafeteria—especially not when Jaxon’s brother is in my head, watching the whole thing.

“I’m not taunting you!” Flint sounds indignant now. “You guys are the ones who wouldn’t stop talking long enough for me to tell you.”

“Well, we’ve stopped talking now,” Luca says. “So spill it.”

“Byron’s parents have decided to donate...” He does a little drumroll on the dining table. “A bloodstone! And not just any bloodstone. It’s one of the queen’s favorites, from the royal collection, that she gifted his parents on the eve of his mate’s death.”

Everything inside me stills as I remember the Bloodletter telling us that she would take care of getting the bloodstone to us. This must be what she meant. A glance at Jaxon’s face tells me he thinks so, too—and that he isn’t the least bit surprised by this bit of news, either. He obviously had a good idea what the Bloodletter would do.

Which also makes his interest in playing Ludares right now—in the middle of everything we have going on—make so much more sense. If the only way to get the bloodstone is to win the tournament, then it looks like hell really has frozen over.

I just need to figure out how not to be a total burden—and, oh yeah, how not to be the first death—on the Ludares field in the history of Katmere.

49



Teamwork Makes the Dream Work... (or it Gives You Nightmares)

“Hey, Jaxon, wait up.” Flint jogs up behind Jaxon, Macy, and me as we walk out of the cafeteria.

Jaxon turns, brows raised. “What’s up?”

“I was just wondering...” Flint trails off, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think he was panicking, though I don’t know why. I do know that he’s floundering, though, mouth opening and closing like he’s searching for words but has forgotten how to actually make sounds.

“Are you okay?” I ask, leaning forward to rest a hand on his arm. “You don’t look so good.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine.” Flint focuses on me for a beat, seems to catch his breath. Then says, “Sorry. Too many thoughts going through my brain at the same time.” He shoots me his ten-thousand-kilowatt grin.

I smile back—it’s impossible not to when Flint gives you that look—and tell him, “Yeah, that happens to me, too, sometimes. So what do you need?”

“Oh, right. I was just wondering if you wanted to spend some time practicing for Ludares today?” he says to Jaxon, then turns to me again. “We could even get that flying lesson in, New Girl.”

“Flying lesson?” Jaxon repeats, looking like he wants to say something.

“If it doesn’t get me punched this time, I thought I’d take New

Girl up, show her some moves,” Flint tells him with a shit-eating grin. “Plus we still have that project for Mr. Damasen to finish.”

“And by moves, you mean how not to die in the air, right?” Jaxon gives him a look that’s half funny and half very definitely not.

“Absolutely. I’m not going to hurt her, Jaxon.” He holds Jaxon’s gaze as he says it, and his usual smile is completely MIA.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before,” Jaxon shoots back.

“Stop it.” I bump him with my shoulder, even as I roll my eyes at Flint. “Ignore him. I’m really looking forward to learning to fly. But today we were going to do something different.”

“Oh yeah?” Flint looks interested. “Like what?”

“Nothing that requires an entourage,” Jaxon interjects.

“Who are you calling your entourage?” Flint demands with a wide grin. “Maybe you and Grace are Macy’s and *my* entourage. Right, Mace?”

For a minute, I think my cousin is going to swoon right here in the middle of the hallway. “Yeah, absolutely,” she tells him, and I swear the only thing more obvious than the stars in her eyes is the drool on her chin. “I think Jaxon would make a great entourage.”

Flint guffaws at that, even as Jaxon gives me a “what the fuck” look. I shrug back, because seriously, what is there to say? Except, “We’re going to the library to grab some info on gargoyle powers and the Dragon Boneyard. Then we thought we’d head up to Jaxon’s room and hang out as we research.”

“Oh, come on,” Hudson says, annoyance coloring every British syllable. “We don’t need Dragon Breath to find out what we need to know.”

Right. Because there’s no way an actual dragon might know anything about the Dragon Boneyard.

“The Dragon Boneyard?” Flint looks intrigued. “What do you want to know about it?”

“Everything,” I answer, linking one arm through Jaxon’s and the other through Flint’s. “So why don’t you come, too? You can help us

figure out what we need to know.”

“Yeah, sure. What do you need?”

“We’ll tell you all about it when we get to Jaxon’s room,” I promise. Then I glance behind me at my cousin, who looks like she doesn’t know if she should follow us or not. “Come on, Mace. We need all the help we can get.”

“Awesome. Just let me text Gwen and tell her I’m not going to be able to hang out later.”

“Oh, never mind,” I tell her. “I forgot you had somewhere to be. Jaxon, Flint, and I can totally handle it.”

Macy shoots me a “stop talking now” look, then fires off a series of quick texts. “Too late,” she says, and then she’s darting in front of us to lead the way to the library.

It doesn’t take us long to gather what we need, partly because Amka has the books ready for us—at Jaxon’s request—and partly because she’s willing to loan us two of the library laptops so we can access the magic databases from anywhere in the castle and not just the library.

Flint helps by grabbing a few books on dragons that he thinks will help, while Macy runs back down to the cafeteria to gather snacks for our “marathon research sesh,” as she keeps calling it. In the meantime, Hudson just lounges around on whatever open chair he can find, calling out book titles that he thinks might help us.

“Where was all this information last night?” I ask him after my third run to the stacks at the back of the library.

“Last night I was too busy—”

“Trying not to vomit,” I fill in for him. “Yeah, yeah, I know the routine by heart by now.”

“Just because I’ve used it a few times doesn’t make it any less true,” he tells me with a definite tone to his voice.

“True, but it does make it lose its impact. At the moment, I’m pretty convinced you have the weakest stomach of anyone I’ve ever met, which is particularly interesting considering you don’t even

have a stomach."

"Sure I do," he responds, and to prove it, he lifts up his T-shirt, revealing—not going to lie—one of the best sets of abs I've ever seen. Seriously. Which...I'm not quite sure how I feel about that. I mean, it shouldn't matter. And it doesn't. But...wow. Just wow. I'd have to be blind not to notice.

Hudson shoots me a smug look but doesn't say anything as he lets his shirt drop back down. Then again, he doesn't have to. The argument over whether or not he has a stomach has most definitely been settled...and I most definitely lost.

"You ready?" Jaxon asks as he comes up behind me with a giant armful of books.

"Yeah, of course. Can I help carry some of those?"

"I've got them," he says with a grin, and he does—at least partly because his abs absolutely give Hudson's a run for their money.

"I call bullshit," Hudson grumbles as we leave the library. He's walking a little bit ahead of us, but he's turned around to face me as he walks backward. Not going to lie, there's a part of me that would love nothing more than for him to trip and fall on his ass.

Petty? Yes. Mean? Absolutely. But I'd still pay good money to see it. Maybe landing on his ass will take him down a peg or ten, which is something he definitely needs. Arrogant prick.

"Don't hold back," Hudson says, and in the blink of an eye, he's suddenly right behind me, his arrogant, smarmy voice right in my ear. "Tell me how you really feel."

"I always do," I shoot back as a shiver runs down my spine.

By the time we get to Jaxon's tower, Macy is already there with a bag full of the least nutritious stuff Katmere has to offer. Chips, popcorn, and even a pack of ten-dollar Oreos.

"I stole them from my dad's stash," she says as she drops them on the table in the antechamber to Jaxon's bedroom, where he does most of his studying.

The last time I saw the place, it was a total mess—Lia made

sure of it before she dragged our drugged asses to the tunnels so she could torture the both of us. But sometime in the three and a half months I was gone, Jaxon not only put it back together, but he actually redecorated the place.

I stroll around the room, vaguely paying attention as Jaxon explains to Flint and Macy fully about what the Bloodletter said we need to do to get Hudson out of my head. Flint has some succinct words about the Unkillable Beast—and the Bloodletter, for that matter—but he's obviously into it. He's hanging on Jaxon's every word and even offering a ton of suggestions.

For once, nobody's paying any attention to me as I run a hand along Jaxon's bookshelves and take in all the new decor. And can I just say I like it? The lack of attention *and* his decorating choices...

Now, instead of a couple of big, comfy chairs dominating the sitting area, there's *one* big, comfy chair and a huge, overstuffed black couch that is definitely large enough for two people to stretch out on. There's a new coffee table—which looks a lot sturdier than the one he turned to kindling during one of his telekinetic losses of control—and in the corner, under the window that nearly killed me when it shattered, is a big table with four black upholstered dining chairs positioned around it. Because of course everything in Jaxon's tower is black. Of course it is...

Except for the books. They're every color under the sun, and they *are* still everywhere—on the bookcases, stacked on the floor in the corners, stacked on the coffee table and underneath the big table, piled up in random places throughout the room—and I love it.

I love even more that there are books I've never heard of mixed with books that are old favorites of mine mixed with classics I've always wanted to read. Add in the artwork on the wall—the Klimt sketch that made me swoon the first time I came up here along with a few other haunting paintings—and this room is pretty much my favorite place on earth.

Then again, how could it not be? Jaxon is here.

I expect Hudson to make a ton of snide comments about the decorating, but he's strangely quiet, staring intently at something on one of Jaxon's shelves, a carving of a horse from the looks of it. It's not a super-intricate carving, but clearly it's something Jaxon loves, the edges smooth and shiny as though his fingers have spent hours rubbing each curve of the horse's neck or body.

Just when I start to wonder what's so interesting about the horse, Hudson shoves his hands deep into his pockets, shaking his head as he walks away. I think I hear him mutter, "Loser," but it's so faint that I can't be sure.

Hudson has been in a weird mood since breakfast, and I refuse to let him ruin my focus again. I'm determined to not wait for Jaxon to take care of me anymore. I need to step up and figure out how to solve my own problems.

Jaxon piles the books on the main table, and I pick one up called *The Myth and Mayhem of Gargoyles*. I don't know why I chose it, except for the fact that I like the idea of causing a little mayhem—me, Grace Foster, pretty much the most un-mayhem-like person on the face of the earth. As I flip it open, I can't help but wonder for a second—or several seconds, if I'm being honest—what it would feel like to just give in to the havoc. To say whatever I want instead of always filtering it, to do what I want instead of what I think I should do.

Then again, now's not exactly the time for that. There's too much going on right now to shake things up just to do it. So I stretch out on Jaxon's very inviting couch and start reading, while everyone else claims their own separate corner of the room.

Flint settles at the main table and flips open one of the laptops, announcing he plans to start researching the Dragon Boneyard—how to get there, the best time of day to go, and how to get out alive, because apparently not getting out alive is an actual thing. Yay.

Macy picks up a book on the magical nature of gargoyles, curls up in the comfy chair across from me, and dives in while nibbling on a giant stack of Oreos.

And Jaxon—Jaxon grabs the other laptop after offering it to me and settles down at the end of the couch to do more research on the Unkillable Beast.

I look around at my friends, all of whom are spending their Saturday cooped up inside looking for information to help me, and my heart swells. They could be doing anything right now, and instead they're doing this.

Hudson can call me emotional, he can call me naïve or overly sentimental or any number of other things, but I still have to blink back tears of gratitude that these people have found their way into my life. I came to Katmere Academy at the lowest point in my life, desperate, miserable, sad. I figured I would just get through the year and then get the hell out.

And while nothing here has been what I expected—I mean, a gargoyle, really?—I can't imagine going back to a life without Macy's enthusiasm or Jaxon's intensity or Flint's teasing (though his murder attempts I can definitely do without).

Sometimes life hands you more than a new hand of cards to play—it hands you a whole new deck, maybe even a whole new game. Losing my parents the way I did will forever be one of the most horrible and traumatizing experiences of my life, but sitting here with these people makes me feel like maybe, just maybe, I've got a chance of coming out the other side of it.

And that is more, so much more, than I imagined just a few short months ago.

"Hey, look at this!" Macy sits up abruptly. "I think I just figured out why the glamour didn't work on you this morning. It wasn't me. It was you!"

"Why? Can't do glamours on stone?" I guess, because that feels about right.

"No." She shoots me a "you're being a dork" look, then flips the book she's reading so I can see. "It didn't work because it says right here that you're immune to magic!"

It's Getting Crowded Under the Bed



“Immune to magic?” Flint asks, closing his laptop and coming over to check out Macy’s find. “Really?”

“And to dragon fire, vampire and werewolf bites, siren calls—the list goes on and on. Basically, gargoyles have a natural built-in resistance to nearly all forms of paranormal magic. That’s—” She holds her hand up to her temple and mimes her brain exploding.

“No wonder Marise always had such a hard time healing you,” she continues. “We put it down to you being completely human, but it must have been the gargoyle thing all along.”

“She had trouble healing me?” I ask, because I don’t remember that at all.

“Yeah, she did,” Jaxon says, a contemplative look on his face. “The first time when she tried to break down my venom and also later, after what happened in the tunnels. With her help healing you, she thought you’d bounce back fast once you got the blood transfusion. But she couldn’t get her powers to work on you the way she thought they should. Everything took longer than it would have with—” He breaks off.

“You can say it,” I tell him. “With a real paranormal.”

“I wasn’t going to say *real*,” he tells me with a frown. “I was going to say with one of the *usual* paranormals. Big difference.”

“Small difference,” I answer, but with a smile to let him know that I’m not actually holding it against him. “But whatever. It doesn’t matter. Because I know I’m not—” I break off as my cheeks start to heat up.

“You’re not what?” Macy asks.

“Umm, well.” I glance anywhere but at my friends. The wall. The wall looks interesting. “It’s just that I know I’m not immune to all of those things.”

“I don’t agree,” Macy says, leaning forward. “I mean, how do we know that Lia’s spell would have even worked if Jaxon didn’t get involved? You can’t use her as proof that you’re not immune.”

“Well, she sure went through a hell of a lot of pain for nothing,” Jaxon says.

“No shit,” Flint agrees. “That was awful.”

“Seriously?” Jaxon tells him, and the fact that his voice is mild makes it all so much worse. “*You’re* going to complain *to us* about what happened in the tunnels being awful, when Grace still has scars from your talons?”

“That’s what those scars are from?” Hudson demands, a sudden glint in his eye that doesn’t bode well for anyone. “*Flint* gave them to you?”

“I thought I was doing the right thing, Jaxon.” The look Flint sends him is pleading. “I thought I was stopping a new effing apocalypse by preventing Lia from bringing Hudson back.”

“The apocalypse? Seriously?” Hudson leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest and an incredulous look on his face. He hasn’t said a word in what feels like forever in Hudson time, but this comment has definitely woken him up with a vengeance. “You people really think I’m the fucking harbinger of the apocalypse?”

“You don’t really want to get into that right now, do you?” I turn and ask.

“Hell yeah, I want to get into it. I’m bloody well sick of being cast as the bad guy.”

“Like I said before, maybe don’t *be* the bad guy, Hudson,” I snap. “You don’t get to have it both ways.”

“We’re getting off track here,” Macy says, waving the book in our faces. “Are you going to tell us why you’re so convinced this is wrong?”

I don’t want to—it feels like giving everyone here a look into something they have no business knowing about—but at this point, I kind of have to. Plus, I do want to know the answer, and maybe one of them has it, even though Jaxon is currently looking as confused as everyone else.

“It’s no big deal,” I tell them. “It’s just that I happen to know for a fact that I’m not immune to vampire bites.”

“How would you know that?” Macy demands. “Has someone tried to bite—” She breaks off, her eyes going wide as understanding dawns. “Ooooooh. So that’s how. Niiice.” She gives Jaxon an approving look.

Suddenly Flint is looking anywhere but at the two of us. “Oh, right. Well, then...” He coughs a little, clears his throat, and looks incredibly uncomfortable as he continues. “Maybe the book is wrong, then?”

“The damn book isn’t wrong,” Hudson snarls. “There are different kinds of bites.”

“It’s not wrong,” Jaxon unconsciously echoes his brother. “If I was trying to inject my venom into you to kill you—or to change you—it probably wouldn’t work because I’d be using my powers. But the times that I’ve bitten you...that’s not what I’m doing. Hurting you or changing you is the last thing on my mind. I’m trying to—”

He breaks off, like he hasn’t already said too much. But it’s too late. All three of us know how he was going to finish that statement—with some variation of the fact that his biting me had nothing to do with pain and everything to do with giving me pleasure.

Which it did. Does. A lot. But no one else needs to know that. Not Flint, who seems strangely disturbed by the image. Not Macy, who has all but turned into a heart-eyed emoji. And definitely not Hudson, who seems to be getting colder—and more pissed off—with each word any of us says.

Macy's going to demand details the second I'm alone—it's written all over her face. And now that I'm thinking about what she's going to ask, I'm also thinking about how I'm going to answer. Which means I'm thinking about Jaxon biting me and—

"Enough already," Hudson growls as I can't help remembering the last time Jaxon did that to me. "You don't have to be so graphic. We get it."

"I wasn't being graphic at all," I answer. "What is your problem today, anyway?"

"I don't have a problem!" he snaps back. "I just think some things should remain private."

"Yeah, well, me too. But here you are." I glance back at Jaxon, who's got his eyebrows raised, like he wants me to tell the whole room what Hudson is saying. I give a quick shake of my head. I just want this entire conversation over.

As if sensing how embarrassed I am by his nondisclosure disclosure, Jaxon pushes us back to the original topic with sheer willpower and a whole lot of royal attitude. It's funny how I forget how well he plays the prince because he does it so rarely—unlike Hudson, whose whole demeanor pretty much shouts, *I'm royalty and you're not fit to lick my boots*.

Hudson's voice is as dry and British as my mother's favorite shortbread cookie when he answers, "To be fair, a lot of people aren't."

I roll my eyes and flick my gaze back to him. "You need to be careful, or people are going to start believing you mean the ridiculous things you say."

"Good."

I just roll my eyes again, then focus on Jaxon, who is quizzing people in a round-robin format on what they've found so far. Not for the first time, I'm grateful that I'm mated to someone like Jaxon, who not only doesn't try to insert himself into my conversations with Hudson but who also steers attention away from the fact that a hundred-years-old vampire is yammering in my head whenever I need

him to. Some of these conversations are bad enough the first time—I couldn’t imagine having to repeat them to Jaxon. He doesn’t need to know all the weird little side trips my brain makes, especially with Hudson egging me on.

Feeling like I’ve dodged a bullet, I settle back down on the couch and continue reading. Sadly, I haven’t really learned anything new at all. Certainly nothing of the scintillating “mayhem” I’d been promised. In fact, the most exciting thing the book has mentioned so far is that gargoyles can stand as sentries for months on end, without a need for food or sleep as long as they are stone.

Just as I suspected, I make an excellent garden gnome. Paint me pink and stand me on one leg and I might even be able to pull off yard flamingo. Fantastic.

I’d feel useless, except Flint hasn’t learned anything yet, either, about the actual Dragon Boneyard that he didn’t already know.

“The only other thing I learned,” Macy says when Flint is finished, “is that gargoyles are supposed to have the power to channel magic. It’s weird. Magic doesn’t work on them, but they can—supposedly—borrow magic from other paranormals and use it themselves.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, intrigued at the idea of having some power, any power, that actually does something. I mean, turning to stone is cool and all if you want to spend your life as a tourist attraction, but it’s not very exciting. Neither is being immune to other powers.

Yeah, it’s a great defensive gift, but it doesn’t let me actually *do* anything. And considering the company I’m keeping, that seems totally unfair.

“I think it means that if I share my power with you, you’ll be able to use it,” Jaxon tells me.

“If that’s the case, we have to try it!” Macy says, jumping out of her chair. “Me first!”

51

Get Your Magic On



Jaxon shakes his head, amused, but does a go-ahead hand gesture as he settles into the couch to watch what happens.

“Okay, cool.” She looks at me. “I’m going to send you some fire energy. See if you can light one of the candles on the bookshelf.”

I look at her like she’s gotten a little too close to her own fire and singed a few brain cells. “You don’t actually think I can light a candle without a match, do you?”

“Of course you can! It’s easy.” She holds an arm out—palm facing up—and focuses on a black candle on the top shelf of the bookcase. Then she curls her fingers into her palms, and the candle wick catches flame. “See? Easy-peasy.”

“Easy for you,” I tell her. “If I try that, one of two things is going to happen. Either nothing will happen *or* I’ll set the entire bookcase on fire—neither of which seems like the outcome we’re going for here.”

“Yeah, well, better here than at the Dragon Boneyard, don’t you think?” Macy says, a rare hint of exasperation in her tone as she looks at me, eyes narrowed and hands on her hips. “Now, come on. Hold your hand up and let’s try it.”

“Okay, fine,” I tell her, standing up even as nerves drop the entire bottom out of my stomach. “But if I set your hair on fire, I don’t want to hear about it.”

"I am a witch, you know. If you set my hair on fire, I'll just grow it back." She grins, moving to stand about three feet from me. "Now, come on. Arm up."

"Okay." I take a deep breath, then blow it out slowly as I do what she requests. "Now what?"

"I want you to try to open yourself up so that I can send some power your way."

I shake my head. "I don't know how to do that."

"Just breathe. And try to reach out for me." She holds her arm out straight at me, but where mine is palm up, hers is palm down. "Okay, Grace. Lower your guards and reach."

I have absolutely no idea what that means, but I figure, *What the hell*. The worst that will happen is I'll look like a total dork and hey, everyone here has already seen me do that at least once.

So I take another deep breath and then try to do what Macy asked me to—I reach for her, trying to will a tiny spark of her magic into me.

"Do you feel anything?" she asks, and her eyes are glowing just a little, in a way I've never seen before.

"No. I'm sorry."

She smiles. "Don't be sorry. Just try again."

I do, and this time I try really hard, but still nothing happens.

"Third time's the charm," Macy says with a grin. Then asks, "Feel it?"

She seems so sure, I can't help wondering if I'm just missing something. "I don't know if I do or not," I answer after trying for several seconds to feel something. Anything.

"You don't," Hudson tells me, not even bothering to look up from the book he's been reading all afternoon.

"How do you know?" I demand.

"Because I'm in your head and *I* don't feel anything? Plus, I have power and I know what you're supposed to feel, and that's definitely not happening right now."

"Of course it's not," I whine. "I'm destined to live my life on the

side of a museum—as the world’s most unaccomplished waterspout.”

A bubble of panic forms in my chest as I realize everyone is staring at me, varying degrees of pity in their eyes. Well, except Hudson. For once, my complete humiliation appears to not be of any interest to him.

Probably sensing my frustration, Jaxon tries to tease me out of my growing anger. “Hey, don’t worry. We can figure this out another day.” He smiles encouragingly. “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

I sigh. Maybe he’s right. This paranormal stuff is all new to me. Maybe it’s perfectly natural that I can’t do even the most basic gargoyle things yet.

Hudson sighs, carefully closing his book and setting it on the cocktail table near his chair in the corner. “Rome wasn’t built in a day, but this is going to be.” He stretches like a cat, his hands so far above his head that the bottom of his T-shirt lifts up to expose those ridiculous abs again.

He catches me looking and raises a brow, right before he says, “You can do this; it’s just clear you need someone with a little more... expertise.”

Screw the candle. My face feels like it’s on fire.

“Grace, are we doing this or not?” Macy asks.

“Not,” I answer. “I can’t figure out what to do.”

“Nobody knows how at the beginning,” Hudson says as he walks over to stand a foot to my side. “You can do this. I promise.”

I turn to face him more fully. “You can’t promise that. You don’t know—”

He gives me a soft smile. “I *do* know.”

“How?” I ask, my voice breaking.

“Because I won’t let you fail.” He nods to Macy. “Tell her to try again.”

I hold his gaze, then take a deep breath. I swivel my head toward Macy. “Hudson says we should try once more, Mace,” I tell my cousin. “And then I’m calling it quits.”

“O-kay,” she says, clearly not sure if she should be glad Hudson is encouraging me to try again or not. “Once more.” And then her eyes do that weird glowy thing as she sends another burst of power my way.

“Ready?” Hudson asks, a grin slowly spreading across his face that sets butterflies loose in my stomach.

“Ready for what?”

He snaps his fingers. “For this.”

52

Come on Baby, Light My Candle



Just like that, there's a weird feeling deep inside me. A spark of heat, of light, of energy that is both familiar and completely foreign at the same time.

"Go ahead," Hudson tells me, his voice little more than a whisper. "Reach for it."

So I do, hand outstretched and everything about me open wide. And then it's there, right there inside me. Arrowing into me. Lighting me up from the inside. Making every nerve ending in my body come alive like I've never felt before.

"Do you feel it now?" Macy asks, voice raised excitedly.

"I do," I tell her, because this has to be it. This brilliant feeling that's warm and bright and airy and light has magic written all over it.

"Good," Macy continues. "Now hold it for a minute, get used to it. Feel it moving through your body."

I do as she says, letting the warmth and the light burn through me.

"What do I do now?" I ask, because while it feels amazing to have this feeling inside me, it also feels unsustainable—like it'll burn right through me and then disappear if I don't know what to do with it.

"Focus your mind," Macy says, "on lighting the candle. Imagine it. And then just do it."

I stare at the candle as hard as I've ever stared at anything in my

life. I imagine it lit, a flame burning along its wick. And then I try to light it.

Nothing happens.

"Don't worry about it," Macy says. "You're so close, I can feel it. Just try again."

So I do, again and again, and still nothing happens.

I can feel the light flickering inside me, feel it starting to dissipate, and I'm so afraid that it'll go away that my hands start to tremble and my chest starts to ache.

Macy must see my distress, because she says, "It's okay. We can try again later."

"Don't listen to her," Hudson tells me, moving to stand right behind me now, both our gazes focused on the candle, so close that I can feel his breath against my ear. "You can do this."

"I can't do this. It's leaving. I can feel it—"

"So draw it back," he orders. "Don't send it out like Macy told you to. Pull it back, concentrate it into one ball of energy, of power, and *then* let it go."

"But Macy said—"

"Fuck what Macy said. Everyone wields their power differently. I can feel it in you. It's right there, ready to be used. So use it."

"I can't—"

"You can."

"It's okay," Jaxon tells me. "We'll practice a little bit each day until you get it."

"Don't listen to him," Hudson orders. "You've got this."

"I don't have it. I don't."

Hudson leans forward, braces his arm under mine, and grabs onto my hand. "Focus," he tells me. "Send every ounce of the magic you feel inside you right here, to where I'm holding you." He squeezes my hand for emphasis. "Pull it back from wherever else you sent it and put it all right there."

I take a deep breath and let it out shakily. Breathe in a second time

and let it out. The third time I breathe in, I hold it for long seconds as I try to do what he asks. The light has made a trail through me, so I grab on to one end of it and start to pull, rolling it back, back, back until it's right there in my chest, my shoulder, my arm. Until finally, I can feel it in the palm of my hand.

"Feel it?" Hudson asks.

I nod, because I do. It's so strong, it's like it's going to burn a hole right through me.

"You've got it now," he tells me.

"I do. I've got it," I whisper.

"I know. Now, open your fist." He lets go of my hand slowly, gently unweaving our fingers even as he keeps his arm directly under mine.

"Aim," he says, his voice and his body a solid presence behind me. Holding my feet to the flame and my palm to the power. Not letting me back up so much as an inch.

And then he's right there—chin near my shoulder, mouth pressed to my ear—as he whispers, "Now let it go."

So I do. And then let out a little scream as every single candle on Jaxon's bookcase bursts into flame at exactly the same moment. Oh my God. I did it. I really did it!

"Holy shit, New Girl!" Flint yelps. "What the hell was that?"

"I don't know." I turn to look at Hudson, and for a second, just a second, he's right there, his face barely an inch from mine. Our eyes lock and power—pure, unadulterated power—sizzles between us. At least until he steps back, putting several feet of distance between us in an instant.

"How much power did you give her, Macy?" Jaxon asks, looking from the bookcase to my cousin and back again.

"That wasn't me," Macy answers. "I can barely do that now with all my power, let alone with the little bit I was siphoning off for Grace."

"Then where did it come from?" Jaxon demands. "Power like that doesn't just—"

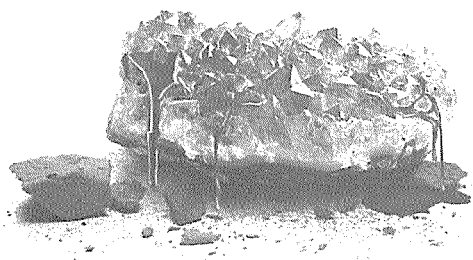
He breaks off as it hits him, which is just about the same time it

hits me. No wonder the power felt strangely familiar. It's been there, lurking inside me, for nearly four months.

"Hudson." Jaxon says his brother's name like it leaves a bad taste in his mouth, nose up and mouth curled into a small sneer while I simply whisper it.

But when I whirl around to confront him, determined to find out what and how and why he did what he did, he's gone. And not "hiding in a corner, pouting" gone, either. He's *gone* gone, and I have absolutely no idea what to do to bring him back.

53

Everybody Wants to
Rule the World

“I don’t know what happened,” I tell Jaxon for what feels like the thousandth time. “He helped me feel the power, helped me focus it, helped me use it, and then he just disappeared.”

“How can he disappear?” Jaxon answers, shoving a hand through his already messed-up hair. “I thought he was trapped in your head?”

“He *is* trapped in my head,” I soothe. “Sometimes he just goes to a part I can’t access very easily.”

“How does that even work?” Flint asks, his voice going up an octave on the last word, and for the first time I realize he’s almost as stressed out as Jaxon. “He’s just running around in your head, and you hope he’s not screwing up anything important?”

I start to take offense—it’s not like I have absolute control over Hudson, but I feel like he and I have been bumping along pretty well since the body-snatching incidents—at least until I remember that Flint’s older brother died because of Hudson. It’s what put such a strain on his friendship with Jaxon, and it’s what led to the weirdness that’s between them today.

“It’s not like that, Flint. We have different times when we give each other privacy—like when I’m in the shower, for instance—where we don’t know what the other person is doing. He’s still trapped in here with me; he’s just out of touch for a little while. He’ll be back.”

Jaxon looks sick. "I never thought about you taking a shower or getting dressed with him around. How come I never thought of that?"

"Because it doesn't matter. We have a system worked out."

"Is this part of your system?" Flint asks, and the tone he uses gets my back up. "Him directing his power through you and then disappearing while you take the consequences?"

"The consequences?" I answer. "You aren't my teacher *or* my parents. There are no *consequences* in us having a discussion, no matter how unhappy you are."

"Plus." I shoot him a narrow-eyed look. "I don't even know what you're so upset about. You wanted me to channel magic and I did, so back off a little, will you?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," Flint shoots back. "I just meant that you're the one who's going to have to fix things if he messes them up, and that doesn't seem fair to you."

His explanation takes a little of the fight out of me, and I slump down onto the back of the couch. "I get that you want answers, guys. I want answers, too. But there are times when something upsets me, and I want to be alone. I owe Hudson that same courtesy."

Besides, after everything that happened, I want some time alone, too. Some time to process everything that happened and just sit with it for a while. So I'm in no hurry for Hudson to come back. Once he does, I'm pretty sure everything is going to get even more complicated.

Flint relaxes a little at my words, and so does Jaxon, but they both keep wary eyes on me. As does Macy, who has been uncharacteristically quiet since the whole magic-channeling thing happened. And while I appreciate the fact that all three of them are only looking out for me in their own ways, I also have to admit that the overprotectiveness is going to exhaust my patience sooner rather than later.

Macy must sense it, because out of the blue, she suddenly suggests, "Hey, why don't you guys go flying?"

"Flying?" I ask, because just the thought of it makes me nervous.

"Yes, flying. It's another one of those powers gargoyles have," she

tells me. “And the one power we knew about before we even started researching. So why don’t you take Flint up on his offer to teach you and just go for it?”

“I don’t know, Macy,” Jaxon says out of nowhere. “Grace has already had to deal with a lot today and—”

Just that easily, I make my decision. Maybe it’s contrary—okay, it’s probably contrary—but Jaxon doesn’t get to decide what I do or when I do it. The guy is a bulldozer, especially with the people he feels responsible for. If I give him an inch, he’ll take seven miles... and then start inquiring about mineral and air rights.

“I’d love to go flying, Flint!” I say with an enthusiasm that is at least partially fake. “But I think we should come up with a plan before we do anything else.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Macy agrees. “I mean, how many days do we have left before Hudson gives up on wandering to other parts of your brain and decides to just go back to doing his ‘adventures in vampire body snatching’ thing?”

It’s a legitimate question, considering Hudson has already gained enough strength to punch a hole in the wall. I didn’t tell Jaxon about that—he’s already so worried that giving him more to stress out about seems like a bad idea—but we’re running out of time. I know it and so does Hudson.

And while there’s a part of me that wants to believe he would never do that to me again now that we’ve gotten to know each other a little, there’s another part that’s smart enough to recognize that Hudson will do whatever he needs to do to get out of my head. That right now he’s going along with me because he knows I’m actively working for the same thing. I don’t know what he’d do if I changed my mind.

“I feel like we have at least a few more days,” I settle for telling everyone. “But I’m not sure about much more than that.”

“Which means we need to get this show on the road,” Flint says. “I have a general idea of where the Boneyard is and how to get there. I just need to get my hands on a map so we’re not wandering around

forever trying to find the right spot.”

“Good plan,” Jaxon says dryly.

Flint pauses. Then he shoots me—and Jaxon—his typical goofy grin. “I’ve already texted my grandma about the map, told her I needed it for a school project, and she promised to text me a pic when she gets back to her lair tonight. Then we should be good to go.”

“That’s awesome!” I tell him. “So we have the Ludares tournament on Wednesday, and that will get us the bloodstone. So we can go to the Dragon Boneyard on Thursday? Or should we go before?”

“Definitely not before,” Flint answers in an “obviously” kind of tone. “The Boneyard is dangerous. If one of us gets hurt, we’ll risk losing Ludares. No way am I going to let that happen.”

“Good point,” Macy says. “If we lose, we don’t get the bloodstone.”

“Pretty sure Flint is more worried about the bragging rights than the bloodstone,” I tease. “But either way, I agree. We can’t risk being hurt going into the tournament.”

“But we can risk being hurt in the Dragon Boneyard?” Macy asks. “I mean, not to sound like a baby, but what kind of hurt are we talking about? A broken finger or full-on dismemberment? Because I can deal with a couple of broken bones, but I need my limbs.”

Jaxon laughs. “Pretty sure we all need our limbs, Macy.”

“Yeah, but now that Grace is a gargoyle, I have the highest chance of actually losing a limb in this whole group. And I just want to go on record as saying, I’m not okay with that,” Macy says.

“Fair enough,” Flint tells her. “Ludares and then a trip to the Boneyard with absolutely no dismemberment. I think we can pull that off.”

“So Boneyard on Thursday night,” Jaxon says. “And if no one loses a leg, we can plan on going after the Unkillable Beast on Friday or Saturday—depending on what shape we’re in?”

“Do we even know where the Unkillable Beast *is*?” Macy asks. “I mean, you mentioned it’s somewhere near the North Pole, but the Arctic is a huge area. And not exactly hospitable. We don’t want to

be bumbling around in freezing temperatures.”

“Actually, I kept researching and discovered it’s on an enchanted island in the Arctic off the coast of Siberia,” Jaxon adds.

“It’s on an enchanted island?” I ask. “Seriously?”

“That’s what the legends say,” Flint agrees.

“Not a legend if it’s true,” Jaxon says. “I spent the last several hours looking for info on the Unkillable Beast’s location, and I think I’ve found it. I’m going to do more research tonight and tomorrow, just to make sure I’m right. But if I am, I say we aim for Saturday.”

“So...Ludares Wednesday, Boneyard Thursday, and Beast on Saturday.” Flint recites the plan, a questioning look on his face. “Everyone good with that?”

“I am,” I tell him, although the truth is that my hands are shaking a little at the thought of that lineup.

“Me too,” Macy agrees.

Jaxon nods.

“Awesome. Can’t wait.” Flint rubs his hands together, then waggles his brows at me. “So how about that flying lesson now?”

Who Needs a Magic Carpet When Your Bestie's a Dragon?



“S o there’s one big problem with flying lessons for me,” I tell him ten minutes later, after I’ve run back to my room for all the cold-weather clothes I need to survive stepping outside in Alaska in March. Which, it turns out, are pretty much the same ones I needed in November, so yay me for missing the really cold months. At least there’s one point in the gargoyle column. “I don’t know how to shift, which means I have no wings. No wings, no flying.” I glance around. “But maybe we could get some of those assignment pictures over for Mr. Damasen?”

I try to hide how positively scared witless I am at letting him take me up in the air in something even less secure than the puddle jumper that brought me to Denali to begin with.

He smiles ruefully. “You know, we don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. I honestly thought it might be fun, might give you a different perspective than before. We can do something else, but eventually you’re going to have to get in the air.”

My stomach is tied in all kinds of knots—most of them falling somewhere in the range of mildly scared to full-blown terrified. And yeah, there’s definitely a part of me that wants to back out of this mess. But Flint looks so dejected at the perceived rejection that I just can’t do it.

“No, that’s okay. Let’s do it.”

He stares at me through narrowed eyes. “Yeah?”

I take a deep breath, then blow it out slowly as I gather every ounce of my courage. “Yeah.”

“Awesome! You won’t regret it.”

I bite my tongue to keep from telling him that I already do.

“You ready?”

“Ready is a bit of an overstatement, but yeah. Sure. Why not?” I wave my hands expansively.

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic,” he says with a laugh.

I roll my eyes. “Dude, this is the best you’re going to get.”

“We’ll see.”

He takes a couple of steps back, which makes me move several more feet in the other direction. More than several, really, because if there’s one thing I’ve learned at Katmere Academy, it’s that you really can’t be too careful when it comes to personal safety.

And then, just like that, Flint does it.

He drops down to all fours and, as I watch, stunned, the very air around him forms a kind of funnel. I’m not sure what’s happening, but I know something is, because the air surrounding him is starting to blur.

Caution has me taking another couple of steps backward, which turns out to be a good thing because the blurring is followed by a bright flash of light that nearly blinds me. Seconds later, a shimmer of rainbow colors engulfs him for five, six, seven or so seconds and then—standing right in front of me is a giant green dragon. And when I say giant, I mean *gigantic*. And also incredibly beautiful.

I didn’t really appreciate Flint in his dragon form when he was trying to kill me, but now that he’s staring down at me with what I’m pretty sure is the dragon version of his ridiculous grin, I can’t help but notice that he is a really, really good-looking dragon.

He’s tall and broad and muscular, with long, sharp horns that curve upward just a little and a ton of gorgeous frills of differing

lengths around his face. His eyes are the same striking amber they are in his human form but with a cool, serpentlike slit down the middle, and his wings are enormous—the kind of enormous where several adult humans could take shelter under one. And his scales...I mean, I always knew he was green, but now I realize that he's actually all the shades of green mixed together, each scale a different color overlapping in a pattern that makes him look like he's shimmering, even when he's just standing here in front of me.

Flint waits patiently while I look him over, but eventually he must get bored because he lowers his head and shows me his really wicked-looking teeth in a way that is definitely designed to get me moving. Which, okay, I get. But I'm beginning to realize we should have talked about a few things before he shifted, because it's becoming more and more obvious that there's at least one really big problem.

"We both know you're gorgeous, so I'm not going to waste a lot of time telling you that," I say as I slowly, carefully cover the ground between us. His eyes track my every move, though my compliment seems to appease him, because he finally hides those wicked teeth of his again.

"But I do have a question for you," I tell him, even as I contemplate reaching out to pet him.

"You do know that he can't talk like this, right?" Hudson asks from where he's sitting on the front stairs, his sudden appearance startling me slightly. I guess "alone time" is done.

I give him a narrow-eyed look. "Of course I know that."

"So how do you expect him to answer you?" Hudson asks. "Sign language? Interpretive dance? Smoke signals?"

"You could shut up and let me talk for a minute." I snark. "How about that?"

Hudson holds a hand up in a "feel free" motion.

I turn back to Flint. "I'm not sure how you're going to answer my question, but I guess we're going to have to figure that out."

He snorts a little, then tilts his head in a gesture I can only